

Wishing on the New Year's sun

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In a series of non-fiction essays, the author explores loss, faith, and ultimately hope. Her stories focus on being a missionary in South Korea where she taught Bible and English as a second language. In *Wishing on a New Year's sun*, the reader is transported to a landscape rich in rice paddies, jagged mountains and delicate cherry blossoms. Trips to the public bathhouse and exotic foods are all part of the experience.

Wishing on the New Year's sun

by

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of
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For the Major Program

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In memory of

Kaarina Maattanen Fordham

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Prelude

I just knew that an axe murderer was lurking outside my curtainless bedroom window. He crouched among the marigolds and crept closer whenever the jacaranda branches scratched across the windowpane. He glided in and out of shadows as the moon slipped through the clouds. I could never quite see him, but he was there. He always came when I had malaria.

Though it has been almost twenty years since I've last had malaria, it's the axe murderer I think of first. It takes longer to remember the chills and fevers that invaded my body and left me exhausted, the clamminess that seeped into every pore or the dull ache that seemed to reach all the way down to my toenails. Perhaps I remember the axe murderer because possibilities have always terrified me more than reality.

I got my worst case of malaria when I was seven. We had just moved to Kenya into a brick house with cool tile floors. We had moved there from Uganda where we had lived for six years. Africa was all I knew. It was home. I belonged to the warmth—to the sun that crept out over the swaying banana trees and to the night air that felt like a soft familiar blanket.

But that night, was cold, so cold. I wanted to curl up into a ball, but I could not move. Not even to gather up the sheets that were bunched at the foot of the bed. I couldn't move because then he might see me.

So instead, I gazed at the ceiling. I stared so hard that I began to see patterns of a face in the stucco and shadows. The jacaranda rasped and banged against the window. I looked away, but there was no escaping. Across the room, a bookcase shifted and spun, first in lazy patterns then more erratically. I clenched my fists and bit my bottom lip.

The door creaked open and I braced myself for an assault. Instead, my mother floated in. A cheerful triangle of light spilled into the room and illuminated half her face, the worried half.

“How are you feeling?” Smiling she bent over and lifted the filmy mosquito netting that surrounded my bed.

“Okay,” I croaked. Mommy touched my forehead and brushed some damp hair out of my face.

“I brought you some Seven Up,” she said, holding out a cup. Through the clear glass, I could see dainty bubbles floating to the surface. The last time I had Seven Up I was on an airplane. I was six and I swung my legs in anticipation as the stewardess opened the can. Now, as I started to lean forward, my stomach lurched. I clutched the stainless steel bowl and shook my head.

“Just try a little,” Mommy coaxed, her voice low and soothing. “It’ll settle your stomach.” She slipped a cool hand under my neck and helped me take a sip. I tightened my grip on the bowl.

“You’ll be okay.” Slowly she lowered me and placed a wet washcloth on my forehead. “You’re going to be just fine.” She untangled the bed sheet and gently draped it over my legs. “Try and get some sleep, okay?” she said as she smoothed my hair again and smiled down into my eyes.

I rolled onto my stomach and squeezed my eyes shut. I felt safe. I couldn’t know then that I would lose her when I was too young. Not yet really safe in this world. Perhaps we never are.

Just as I was starting to relax, I sensed Mommy melting toward the door. I looked up with wide eyes, but she didn't notice. She was focused on a shadow that was hovering in the hall.

"How is she?" Daddy asked.

Mommy's answer was muted. I propped my head up and strained to listen. Bits and pieces of their conversation floated into the room. The voices were low and intense.

"Burning up . . . don't know what to do . . . need a doctor . . . feel so helpless . . . doctor . . . hospital . . . could die . . . nothing to do." The last came out a strangled whisper.

I dropped my head on the pillow, all thoughts of the axe murderer vanished. I knew there were no doctors in Kamagambo. But I didn't want to die. I was too young to die. I had never even owned a watch, my secret desire. My stomach tightened and my heart pounded. I just knew that this was what death felt like.

Dear Jesus, I prayed, clasping my two hands together and squeezing my eyes shut. Don't let me die. Please don't let me die. If I live I'll be a missionary. I promise. Oh don't let me die. Dear God, please help me to live.

Beginnings

*Ah**Yah**Oh**Yo**Uh**Yuh**Ou**You**Oo**Ee*

I clutched a crumpled sheet of paper in my lap and murmured Korean vowel sounds. Outside the bus window, the sun hung low in the sky. Long rays of light fell across an unfamiliar landscape. Lush rice paddies sewn together in exact squares, like brilliant pieces of a green quilt, spread across the horizon and crept up the edges of a jagged mountain. South Korea is only slightly larger than Indiana and mountains cover seventy percent of the nation. To adapt, farmers have carved ribbons of land out of the foothills.

As we passed a small farming village I craned my neck. I was seeing, yet not seeing. The homes were surrounded by walls built from brown and slate colored stones and the only things visible beyond the walls were roofs. Dark gray tiles, called *ghee wah*, overlapped to form each one. The corners of the eaves curved slightly upward giving them a quaint appearance. The village flashed past the window and disappeared. Ahead there were more rice paddies, more mountains.

I glanced down at my sheet of vowels. Next to each character, I had written a phonetic sound in English letters. *Ah, yah, oh, yo, uo, uh, yuh, you, oo, ee*. There are ten vowels and fourteen consonants in the Korean alphabet. Although the characters looked cryptic, they are strictly phonetic and it's easy to learn how to read. At least that was what

my older sister Sonja had told me. She said she learned how to read Korean in a single afternoon. I hoped to learn the vowels.

I came to South Korea because Sonja lived in Pusan, a city at the very tip of the peninsula, the only city not invaded during the Korean War. My destiny was determined three years ago when Sonja decided to teach English instead of attending medical school like everyone expected. One chance decision brought me halfway around the world. But destiny is a funny word. It contradicts impetuosity. It suggests purpose, being set aside for something, being called. Maybe I wasn't just drawn here because of a casual conversation. Maybe I had been moving toward South Korea my whole life.

• • •

Sonja and I grew up as missionary kids. Our family belonged to the Seventh-day Adventist church, a protestant denomination that worships on Saturday instead of Sunday. My father taught ministerial students at a seminary in Uganda, my mother taught English. We lived on a hill, one mile from Bugema College. Vervet monkeys hung down from jackfruit trees and peered through our living room window. We didn't have a television or a telephone, and our electricity was often cut off for days at a time. We got our water from a large rain barrel that stood next to the house. There were lots of snakes—vipers, pythons, cobras. Once, my mother used a garden hoe to kill a green mamba that had slithered onto our gray kitchen floor.

I was a grubby, happy child. The knees of my hand-me-down jeans were often stained from climbing guava trees and pushing matchbox cars through the dirt in our backyard. On sunny afternoons, I would dress up my guinea pig in doll clothes and push her around in a baby pram. I was always small. My hair was dishwater blond and generally

messy. I had a gap tooth smile. My nose was snubbed, my cheeks round and rosy, my eyes were almost almond shaped.

Sonja was three years older and knew everything. Her hair was longer and darker than mine. She was tall, graceful. Because she was older, her clothes were newer, but no more stylish. We were missionary kids and there wasn't much money to go around. But we thought we were rich. We had toys and clothes and shoes and books, while many of our playmates wore the same t-shirt and shorts every day. When our friends came to visit, Sonja and I would give them Fisher Price dolls and matchbox cars.

In many ways, Sonja and I had an idyllic childhood. We lived in a clearing, surrounded by lush jungle and tropical birds. We spent most days outside, snacking on guavas or star fruits. We had plenty of pets. I even adopted a cow at the dairy farm one mile down the hill. At home our mom made everything from scratch—yogurt, tofu, bread, granola, peanut butter, guava sauce, gluten. We were like the ultimate hippies, with God at the center of our lives. But no matter how happy we were, how apparently carefree, fear was always there at the periphery of our perfect world.

Our family moved to Uganda at a time when most missionaries were leaving. It was 1975 and Idi Amin was dictator. During his eight-year reign, 300,000 civilians died. Ugandans grew to fear the late night abductions and mysterious disappearances of their neighbors and friends. They whispered behind locked doors about the State Research Bureau, an imposing building that had become infamous for torture. At night, my parents would send Sonja and me to bed with kisses. Then, under the dim glow of a candle, they would lean over the radio and listen in horror to the BBC news reports.

By now the Ugandan economy was shattered, and it was almost impossible to find staples like flour, sugar, oil and soap. Those who could, visited bordering countries and brought back food. My parents were no exception. On the few trips we took to Kenya, my mom stashed a large jug of oil between her feet—the oil would later be divided among all the teachers at the college. To hide it, she would drape her long, flowing skirt over the jug, so that just her toes were exposed.

I only recently discovered what a risk my parents were taking. To counter the black market, Idi Amin had ordered all smugglers to be shot on sight. It's hard to believe that the same parents who would later tremble when I got my driver's license in the States and who wouldn't let me stay out past midnight, coolly smuggled food past soldiers with machine guns. It's even more astonishing since we were sometimes caught. Then my dad would bribe the gunmen with either a watch (bought for that purpose) or a thick bar of yellow soap, sometimes both.

I can't even remember the first time we stopped at a roadblock and a soldier questioned my parents at gunpoint. Machine guns were as common to my world as the tall red termite mounds or the thatch-roofed huts. I was scared of the guns, but I don't think I associated them with death. We didn't have a TV, so I'd never seen a western or a cop show, I'd never seen a single gunfight. All I knew was that the camouflaged soldiers made my mother's voice tremble, that my Dad slapped the steering wheel when he saw a roadblock ahead. After the soldiers pulled us over, Sonja and I would sit in the backseat, our eyes wide. We never once whimpered or said anything. We were like two ghosts.

In 1979, Idi Amin was overthrown by Obote, Uganda's former president. After the coup, Ugandans danced in the streets of Kampala. Tears trickled down the cheeks of those

who had seen too much suffering. After eight long years, the future finally looked brighter. It seemed a time of hope and rebirth for all Ugandans, but the celebrations did not last long. With Obote came more atrocities, more civil war, more disappearances, more bodies floating down the Nile River. Over the next four years, a half-million more Ugandans would die.

After six years of living in danger, my mother finally insisted that we leave. I had been a baby when we moved to Bugema College and the house on the hill, with its lipstick red bricks and dense jungle, was all I knew. I had taken my first steps there, had my first pet—a chicken, learned how to read, fought with my sister, played in the rain, eaten countless meals of rice and beans, lisped my first prayers. I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

• • •

It was the rainy season when my family moved to Kenya. Afternoon showers pelted the tin roof of our new home. Neighbors slipped off their muddy flip-flops at the door when they came to welcome us. I remember lurking in the background, dancing in and out of the two doorways that led into the living room. "For goodness sakes, come in and say hi," my mother called out. I smiled, then covered my face and darted back to my bedroom.

I got to know the neighbors better during weekly socials. The missionaries at Kamagambo College gathered every Saturday night and made ice cream. The men would crank recalcitrant machines, while the ladies sat on the porch chatting. We children would leap around in the dusk, catching lightning bugs. Later, everyone played board games.

Both my parents taught at Kamagombo College. Like Bugema, it was a seminary, but here there was no jungle. Our new house was built out of pale brick, and from our front porch we could see the neighbors' houses. For the first time, my mother could plant a garden

without worrying about monkeys stealing her tomatoes. She grew carrots and lettuce and rows of beans. Kamagombo wasn't exactly the suburbs though. Sometimes servals (spotted wild cats with large ears) would try to sneak into our chicken coop. If my father heard the hens squawking, he would hurriedly put on his rubber boots and race out the door. More often, the chickens were fussing because of army ants, which were just as dangerous. A column could march right through a flapping hen, a hundred mandibles munching as they moved. Army ants are the ultimate nomads. They roam Africa in a long, winding procession. It can days for them to cross a road.

In Kenya, Sonja and I began attending home school. For a couple hours in the morning, we studied math, science, and social studies under the watchful eye of our mom. In the afternoon we built kites or played in the neighbor's guava orchard. We didn't fall behind in our schoolwork because my mother turned reading into an adventure. It became a privilege. Something we could only do after all the chores had been done and our rooms were clean. Even now, I feel guilty if I impulsively pick up a book while there are still dishes in the sink.

On Saturday, we attended church. Sonja and I would walk down the long dirt road to Sabbath School, each of us holding a shilling that my mom had given us to drop in the offering plate. Usually, our parents rushed off ahead of us. They had to teach a Bible study class or make special arrangements for church.

In Sabbath School we sang, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus." I remember sitting in a metal chair, my feet dangled high about the concrete floor. I would gaze up at the window above the teacher's head, the sun was too high to see, but a beam of sunlight would shine down. It illuminated a patch of ordinary concrete and turned it into something warm, almost

magical. I would sing up at that light, certain that I was looking at Jesus. When we sang, I felt holy.

Jesus was very real, and I often thought about going to heaven. I waited expectantly for the second coming, when Jesus would return in a cloud that first appeared to be the size of a man's hand, but then grew bigger and bigger until finally it exploded into light and angels' wings and joyful trumpet sounds. I remember rushing outside on sunny afternoons and looking for a cloud. I would twirl about, shielding my eyes with my own tiny hands. Sometimes, I would find what I thought was *the* cloud. It would be miles above me in the sky, soft and just the right size. I would sit on the stoop and wait to see if it got bigger. When it melted away into wispy streams, I would turn and look for another cloud and another.



I will never forget the hot, heavy air on the night I left Africa. I was only ten, but I can still remember standing on the cement sidewalk, clutching my sister Sonja's sticky hand. Damp blond curls clung to my face. In the distance, a car honked repeatedly and tires squealed. My father grunted as he set heavy suitcases down next to me. "Watch them," he said, while my mother paid the taxi driver. Then my parents loaded our suitcases onto a cart. Together we walked into the airport and were greeted by a cold wall of air.

Later, I pressed my nose against the airplane window. I stared out at the blinking blue and white lights as the plane slowly taxied down the runway and then began going faster and faster. The wheels whined. My mother gripped the armrest. With a jolt, the plane heaved itself off the earth and for one incredible moment my heart hovered in midair. Inside, the plane was bright. Stewardesses began distributing pillows and thin blue blankets.

I leaned closer to the window and shielded my eyes with both hands. Below me Nairobi shimmered, my final glimpse of Africa.



When we moved to American in 1984 it became much harder for me to see Jesus. My parents returned to the States because Sonja was in seventh grade and needed braces. My father would work on his PhD. I had just turned ten years old. We attended an octagon-shaped church in Fort Worth, Texas. It had plush pews and very few windows. We never sang, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus." I would sit in Sabbath School class and pull at my scratchy pantyhose. I longed for Africa.

My parents bought a house in the suburbs. The division was new, but already the neighbors had rushed out to cover every inch of parched Texan earth with neatly trimmed lawns. I would ride my bike past block after block of tame green grass. There wasn't a tree to be seen, only a few optimistic sticks poking out of the ground. There was nothing to race across, climb, explore. There was nothing remotely wild.

Gradually, I got used to being American. I learned that cool was a good thing and that wearing Guess jeans and Keds could help me play cool, while carrying a lunch box was definitely uncool. I learned that if I didn't want to be the last person picked for team, I either had to become popular like Felicia McKay or figure out how to catch a ball. I didn't have much hope of becoming like Felicia. She was already wearing makeup in the fourth grade, and my mom glared suspiciously at my nails if I painted them with clear polish. So during recess, I convinced my best friend to play two-person football, two-person baseball.

At home, Sonja and I discovered television. We would rush home to watch *The People's Court* with crusty Judge Wopner. Today, if I hear the boom da da, boom da da da

theme song I'm instantly transported back to my first year in America. Eventually, Sonja and I discovered *The Brady Bunch*, *Gilligan's Island*, *Growing Pains*. We began watching TV more and playing outside less.

• • •

I was an assimilated American by the time we moved to Atlanta. It had been four years since we left Kenya, but it felt like a hundred. I no longer gazed out the car window and tried to find patches of Africa. I didn't mentally erase billboards or use my imagination to change cow fields into savannahs with mustard colored grass. I was a typical eighth grader, lanky with braces and a home perm. When my parents bought me my first pair of high heels, I felt indescribably elegant. They were white kid leather, and I wobbled when I walked.

We moved into a two-story home tucked in the woods. My bedroom overlooked Scandinavian birch trees that seemed to thrive in the South. In this house, my mother and I screamed as Cabrera's line drive sent the Braves to the World Series. We often had picnics outside and, for Sunday brunch, we ate waffles with strawberries and real whipped cream. During the summer, our family went to Braves games and watched fireworks on the fourth of July. We hiked at Stone Mountain and baked pizzas, piled with vegetarian toppings. In the evenings, I practiced free throws and lay-ups with my friend Tiffany. Eventually, we'd end up lounging in my room, giggling about boys and painting our toenails red. In high school, we both joined the girl's basketball team.

My Dad was the minister of two churches, but I never became the stereotypical pastor's kid, the rebellious PK. Instead, I would often tell the children's story or baby-sit in the nursery. Before church, I folded the bulletins. The hardest part about being a pastor's

daughter was mingling. I would try to escape to the car or play the piano in one of the Sabbath School rooms while I waited for my family after church. The only real controversy I was involved in was when a pious church member venomously complained that my skirts were getting too short, my lipstick too red.

“I can’t believe it,” I said when my father told me. “What did you tell him?”

“I told them red was a good color on you,” he shrugged.

“He’s such a hypocrite,” I said, and flopped tragically onto the couch, but secretly I was thrilled. My friends thought I was hopelessly good, even for the private Adventist high school we all attended. I was part of what the teachers considered the wild class, the troublemakers. And indeed, most everyone got drunk on the weekends or at least experimented with alcohol. But I stayed demurely on the sidelines. I didn’t even have to say no thanks. The guys would cuff me good-naturedly on the arm and in slurred voices tell me how much they looked up to me.

I never wanted to drink. I suspect that part of it was that I didn’t want to disappoint my parents. The Seventh-day Adventist church discourages drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. My parents were liberal in theology, but much stricter when it came to the behavior of their own daughters. I certainly could have tried a wine cooler and not told my parents. But when it came to hard and fast rules, I usually followed them.

After high school, I went to Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. Sonja was a junior there and the resident assistant on my hall. Every morning, I would tap on her door and we would eat granola together. My parents still made it, and they would send batches home with us every time we visited.

At first, I wanted to major in Biology and become a doctor. Sonja introduced me to all her professors. She was a brilliant student, and her teachers looked delighted at the chance to teach another Fordham superstar. But it turned out that I was horrible at calculus, I struggled in biology, and I couldn't even bring myself to try physics. When I changed my major to history, I felt defeated. For as long as I could remember, I had wanted to be a missionary doctor. It's possible I wanted to be a missionary for the same reason a farmer's child wants to be a farmer, a policeman's child wants to be a policeman, a teacher's child wants to be a teacher. But I also remember feeling special, feeling called by God.

I had dreamed about opening a clinic in a small village. I imagined myself wearing a flowing linen dress and giving inoculations to a line of children. It would be hot, and sweat might trickle down my back or bead on my upper lip, but I wouldn't care. Not when I saw the faces of the children. They were lovely. No task could be more noble than saving their lives.

• • •

Now as I traveled through South Korea in a commercial bus with plush blue seats and metal foot rests, I leaned my head against the window and drifted to sleep. The carefully prepared sheet of vowels slipped to the floor. I slipped in and out of sleep as the lulling sway of the bus was replaced by jarring stops and sharp turns. Bright lights flickered against my eyelids, and my head began to tap against the smooth glass window. A final thud woke me for good. I sat up grumpily and rubbed the side of my head. We had entered Pusan.

I have always loved to drive through cities at night when the grime and smog disappear under a canopy of lights. In Pusan, the charm was magnified. Though I didn't see a single Chinese lantern, I felt like I had seen a hundred. Every store and restaurant had

skinny neon signs. Korean letters and Chinese characters were written vertically in red. I tried to read the vowels, but as we sped by, the signs blurred together into festive streams of scarlet.

Enchanted, I pressed my nose to the window and looked down at the small streets. The light illuminated a flood of people. They wandered in and out of bars, stationary stores, arcade rooms, coffeehouses, *nori bangs* [singing rooms], bowling alleys, sushi bars, fast food restaurants and traditional teahouses. Among the jostling crowd was a line of young girls, their arms looped causally around each other. With their blue and white school uniforms and shoulder length haircuts, they resembled a string of paper dolls.

Living in South Korea would be much different than my original dreams of mission service. Korea is an ancient society. Time seems to stand still at the Buddhist temples that are nestled into the mountainsides. But Korea is also a modern society with more cell phones and laptop computers per person than in the United States. It is not a country with obvious physical needs.

I had always wanted to help people in a concrete way. I wanted to heal bodies or feed the hungry. I thought of the children I had seen begging in Nairobi. They would stand next to train stations or hotels. Their tiny bodies were covered with sores, and they didn't bother to shoo away the flies that landed near their eyes and lips. As a child, I had always felt so helpless. Now that I was older, I wanted to change the world so that no little children would ever again have to stand hungry next to so very much.

But in Pusan, I was not going to work at an orphanage or food bank. I would teach English at SDA Language Institute. The mission part of my job would be telling people about Jesus. My own relationship with Jesus was deeply personal and when it came to

witnessing, I was shy. I thought of Jehovah's Witnesses. They were always polite, sincere. Yet when I opened the door and saw two men in suits, I cringed. I didn't want other people to feel that way about me.

• • •

Outside, a large commercial bus pulled alongside us. The aisle was filled with people bouncing, swaying, and gyrating to invisible music. I stared, incredulous. Bright lights inside illuminated the dancers. They were mostly women with wrinkled faces and permed hair. I guessed that they were mothers and grandmothers with mundane responsibilities. But at the moment they were luminous. They were free. They jumped up and down in sync, their faces alive.

There was something invigorating and right about coming to South Korea as a missionary. It was like I was coming full circle. I began to remember things about Africa that I hadn't thought about in a long time, like the smell of dirt after it rained, or our plumeria tree with its pale yellow flowers, or the red glow cast across our living room from a scarlet lampshade. It was in Africa that I knew I wanted to be a missionary. Now was my chance.

Do You Love Your Neighbor?

“Here you go, Silver Stone,” I said, handing him his listening quiz. Silver Stone leaned back in the desk, his long legs sprawled out in front of him. His black hair was short and spiked. He wore a tight t-shirt and a tough guy expression. He looked about my age.

“I’m not Silver Stone,” he said.

“Oh!” I replied, fumbling with the papers. “Sorry.”

“I’m Lightning,” he said. He tilted his head to one side and the corner of his mouth began to twitch.

He had been studying at SDA Language Institute for over a year now, while I had only been teaching for a week. New teachers are normally assigned low-level classes because the students are less experienced, less demanding. But I was trusted with level four. I think because my sister was a legend at SDA Institute. Many of the level four students had had her as a teacher. “You Sonja’s sister?” they had asked the first day of class. “Ah, Sonja excellent teacher. Sonja is the best!”

I found Lightning’s quiz and handed it to him. I turned to the shorter student sitting next to him.

“Okay,” I said. “*You* are Silver Stone.”

“I’m not Silver Stone.” The student looked up at me. His face was round and he wore a pair of wire glasses. “I’m John.” The men started laughing. Other conversations died down and everyone turned to watch me. I felt like I was back in seventh grade, trying to find a place to sit in the cafeteria. *Silver Stone is probably absent today*, I decided. I moved his quiz to the back of the stack and handed John his quiz. The name on the next paper said Won in terse, angular letters. *Rhymes with Ron not sun*, I reminded myself. I definitely

knew Won. With his military haircut and high cheekbones he had an unforgettable face, the kind of face that legends are made of.

“Here you are, Won,” I said, setting the quiz lightly on his desk.

“I’m not Won,” he choked. His shoulders began to shake, and soon he was laughing so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. “I’m Silver Stone.”

I’d become this stereotypical American who couldn’t tell Asians apart, though I knew that if I taught 140 students in America, I would probably have the same problem. Still I would never be able to convince poor Silver Stone—and that wasn’t even his real name.

Like many language schools, SDA institute encourages students to choose western nicknames. This is supposed to make English interesting, and it lets teachers call students by their first names without violating any etiquette rules. Normally, a prefix or suffix is added to a Korean name based on one’s age and relationship. Since I was younger than many of my students, the rules got complicated.

On the first day of class, I told my level one students that their homework was choosing an English nickname. I trotted out Jason, Chris, Julie and Heather as stellar examples. The students nodded, but the next day they had told me their nicknames were Terminator and Swan. This term I was teaching students named Vision, Carrot, Cream, Only You, Lightning (who had been struck by lightning), several Ducks, a Doughnut, and, of course, Silver Stone.

After handing back the rest of the quizzes, I dismissed class. “See you tomorrow,” I called out in my best, happy teacher voice. The level-four students gathered up their books and pushed out the door. Everyone, that is, except JR.

“Do we take conversation test?” JR asked me. JR was by far the most diligent student in class. He sat front and center. His three pencils were always sharpened and he normally lined them up next to his well-worn Korean-English dictionary. If any student was going to come bearing apples, it would have been JR.

“Tomorrow? No, just regular class,” I said.

“Thank you,” he replied, but he looked doubtful. As soon as JR was out the door, I flipped through the level-four book until I found the next day’s assignment—lesson 9. Sure enough, a conversation test was scheduled.

Well, Silver Stone, Lightning and gang will be delighted, I thought, smiling. But what on earth was I going to do with them for 50 minutes? It was like being granted free time with Henry the Eighth—exciting at first, but rather unnerving in the long run.



Living in South Korea was fraught with the unexpected, the unfamiliar. A week after I arrived in Pusan, I visited an open-air market by the sea. I walked along the wharf placing one foot in front of the other, my arms stretched out like an airplane. I felt carefree, childish. Pale sea gulls bobbed in the rolling ocean like bathtub toys, and the air smelled of fish and salt.

I veered naturally toward the marketplace, where row after row of portable shops lined the jagged cement walk. In front of me, a woman with jangly earrings and high-heeled shoes bent over a basin of silver fish that laid sideways on a bed of ice. She poked half-heartedly at one fish and held up another between two long fingernails. In her other hand, she clutched a tiny cell phone. She spoke rapidly between long pauses. The vendor was an old woman. Her eyes were yellowing, but kind. Her face was lined with wrinkles. She

squatted next to the fish, her plastic flip-flops flat on the ground. I wondered if she was a teenager during the Korean war. I wondered if her family was one of the thousands who fled south to Pusan. I wanted to squat down next to her and hear her story. Yet I was embarrassed when she caught me staring at her. She grinned suddenly, her teeth brownish, her smile warm.

Other vendors shouted as they hawked their ware. They plunged their hands into basins of water and pulled out wiggling fish or sea cucumber or sea anemone. Some sold sacks of dried anchovies, which stared up with wrinkled eyeballs. Still other merchants displayed their catch in large glass tanks. Inside, octopus and squid floated up and down, waving their tentacles like many armed hula dancers.

Dizzy with the new textures, the new sounds, the new sights, I picked my way through the market, careful not to step on fish scales or the blood that was smeared across the cement. Could I ever feel at home here?

Ahead, a sturdy woman with a well-scrubbed face held up an eel with one hand and a paring knife in the other. With a few efficient flicks of her wrist, slick black skin slid off the eel like melted butter. She threw the skin away and dropped the eel into a plastic basin, which was almost filled with naked eels. They slithered around—like many searching fingers turned inside out. If they could scream, I felt certain that their voices would crescendo into a piercing wail that could be heard throughout the market.

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Living in South Korea was unbalancing. Teaching at SDA language institute was chaotic. I was overwhelmed with lesson preparation and homesickness, with grading papers

and expectations, with teaching and trying new foods. Everything was different, and I felt like I would never belong.

Now, I agonized over what I would do with my level four students. I couldn't give them a conversation test if I hadn't announced it. I couldn't cancel class. I couldn't take them on a field trip at seven in the morning.

When my last morning class was over, I charged into the teachers' lounge. A more experienced teacher, Bryan, was typing madly on the staff computer. His forehead was scrunched up and his long nose was inches from the screen. Bryan had started teaching at SDA institute five years ago. He loved God, Korean women and extreme sports—in that order.

“Do you know any good group games I can use?” I asked him.

Bryan didn't even finish the sentence he was typing; he just pushed back his chair and started reeling off options. “I know this awesome game that you're gonna love.” Bryan came and sat down on the grungy couch across from me. He started waving his hands around while he explained the rules. I wasn't clear on the point, but the game involved a rolled up newspaper and hitting people on the head. I pictured Silver Stone hovering over me, a manic smile on his lips, a newspaper raised high over his head.

“Do you know any other games?” I asked.

“Yeah, but the newspaper game is the best,” Bryan said, launching into another long explanation. His blond hair was slicked back and his face was animated. His eyebrows bounced up and down as he spent the next five minutes trying to convince me.

“I really want something tamer,” I insisted.

“Well, there is always ‘Do you love your neighbor?’” His tone made it obvious that he considered “Do you love your neighbor?” vastly inferior to the newspaper game.

This encouraged me. “Sounds fabulous,” I said. “How do you play?”

“Well, you put the desks in a circle and one person stands in the middle. The middle person wants to sit down and he gets a seat by asking his classmates questions. It’s simple.”

It sounded simple.

• • •

The next morning, I arrived at school early to prepare for the game. Even though it was dark outside, the institute was crowded. The listening lab was across the hall from my classroom. Inside, students sat in partitioned booths and wore large earphones. They would listen for a moment and then repeat the phrase. Listen and repeat. The pattern was like waves crashing against the beach. Some students were slumped forward, their eyes pressed tightly together. Learning English was just one more thing crammed into a busy day.

I unlocked my room and flipped on the lights. It still seemed dreamlike that this was my classroom. *My classroom*. The place where I was supposed to make the most abstract concepts brilliantly clear, to wax eloquent, to inspire greatness. It wasn’t much to look at, but it was mine. The room was a narrow rectangle, with smudged walls and a tiled floor. The students’ desks sat in two long rows facing the white board. My own desk was a battlefield green and pushed up against one wall. It was littered with student papers, teaching references, picture frames, and florescent folders. It had the chaotic feel of my dorm room back in America.

Now, I sank into the tall swivel stool at the front of the room and rested my elbows on the music stand. The room’s one small window faced in a somewhat easterly direction. I

could never quite see the rising sun, but streaks of pink and violet glimmered across the ever-lightening sky. In the magical twilight, I glowed with goodwill, confident that I was in the right place.

• • •

At exactly seven, listening lab was over and students crowded the hall. I quickly finished writing the game's dialogue on the board. When I turned around, most of the chairs were filled.

"Good morning," I said. A few students yawned. Some blinked up at me. Several smiled. One or two searched for their books in their backpacks.

"Okay, well, let's start with a prayer," I said. I didn't wait for the students to bow their heads or close their eyes. I just began. "Dear Jesus, Thank you for this beautiful day. Thank you for these students. Help us all learn something today. Amen."

I felt uncomfortable praying out loud. I became so conscious of all the people who were listening that I forgot about God. I couldn't naturally talk to Him; instead, I strung together as many pious-sounding phrases as I could think of. Flustered and anxious, my public prayers were always short. I remembered the horror I felt when I first learned that I had to pray in front of my students. It was in Seoul during training. The other new teachers just nodded nonchalantly, but my eyes widened. "Really?" I asked without thinking.

"Before *every* class?" The students, though, didn't seem to mind. Even the Buddhist understood that this was a Christian institute.

Now, when I opened my eyes, twenty students stared back. There was something vulnerable about being watched while my eyes were closed. I nervously picked up the textbook and then set it down again.

“We’re going to play a game today,” I said. The class exchanged smiles. Most were college students and, although they paid to learn English, they preferred games to conversation tests.

I briefly explained the rules and then asked the students to move their desks into a circle. I stood in the narrow space in the middle. To begin the game, I needed someone to help me. The person had to speak English well enough to understand the rules. Then we could model the concept for everyone else. I met Flower’s eyes and she looked up and smiled. Her long hair was dyed red and clasped back with several rhinestone barrettes. She wore a pink tee shirt with feather trimming around the neck. On the first day of class, Flower had squeezed my arm and told me that I was a wonderful teacher.

Now, I turned to her and slowly asked, “Do you love your neighbors?” I was referring to the two students sitting on each side of her.

“No,” she replied after giving each of them a long look. If she had said yes, her “neighbors” would have had to exchange chairs and I would have tried to sit in one of their seats.

“Then who do you love?” I asked.

“I love everyone who is wearing underwear,” Flower said, enunciating each syllable.

“Oh,” I said. By the rules of the game, everyone wearing underwear would have to get up and find a different chair. While everyone was exchanging seats, the person in the middle (me) would try to sit down. Whoever couldn’t find a chair became the new person in the middle. I looked around the room. Nobody moved.

Underwear? One of the college girls giggled. JR looked embarrassed. John and Silver Stone elbowed each other like first graders while Lightning laughed loudly. And

everyone was looking around the room to see who would get up first. I waited. Nobody moved. The silence grew oppressive. “Don’t you wear underwear?” I finally asked. I couldn’t believe I was asking my students if they wore underwear. If I had gone with the newspaper game, we would have been happily hitting each other over the heads.

After an awkward pause, Flower set her purse on the floor, tossed some hair over her shoulder and stood up. Before she could change her mind, I slipped into her seat. After more laughing and some prodding from Flower, all the women and half the men exchanged places. I wasn’t sure whether the other men didn’t understand the question, didn’t wear underwear, or didn’t want to get up—but I certainly wasn’t going to try and find out.

And so the game continued. *I love everyone who is wearing black hair.* “Has black hair,” I corrected. *I love everyone who is handsome. I love everyone who is long legs.* “Has long legs,” I said. *I love everyone who is wearing glasses. I love everyone who is make up.* “Is wearing make up.”

After about twenty minutes, the game started to drag. Silver Stone suggested having a penalty for the person caught in the middle three times. “Sure,” I answered. “What kind of penalty?”

“Writing your name with your hip,” he said.

“Hip” is a common substitute for “butt” in Korea, but nobody had told me that. It never came up in teachers’ orientation, and maybe that threw me because I agreed to the penalty. It took me a few minutes before I realize what I’d gotten myself into. By the time I got a disturbing visual of my gluteus maximus hanging in the air and then swinging around the letters s-a-r-i (my butt’s personal hokey poky dance), it was too late to back out.

After the penalty was announced, “Do you love your neighbors” became Korea’s answer to tackle football. Students bumped, shoved, pushed and pulled. In a particularly heated match, JR elbowed Flower out of the way and dived for the last desk. Flower, who was teetering on stiletto heels, wrapped her arms around his waist, swiveled him around, and dropped into the chair moments before he landed in her lap. The class erupted in applause and JR became the next person in the middle.

While my students shrieked and madly dashed across the room, I quietly moved from desk to desk. I would look for the closest, empty chair and then slip in it. My strategy had worked well. Class would be over in five minutes and I had only been caught in the middle once. I was in no danger of writing my name with my butt. And then the plot began.

“I love everyone with blond hair,” JR said, smiling at me. Several girls with dark brown hair jumped up and exchanged places.

“What about you?” Lightning leaned over and asked.

“My hair’s brown,” I told him. “Blond hair is a lot lighter.”

I glanced up at Jeannie, who was trapped in the middle. Except for a few orange streaks, her hair was very black. I bit my bottom lip and watched as she wrung her hands and shifted her weight from foot to foot. I wanted to help her, but I knew she’d be more embarrassed if I announced that she wasn’t blond. I was relieved when John said something encouraging to her in Korean. She smiled in response. Then she walked over and asked him, “Do you love your neighbors?”

“No,” he said. “I love everyone American.” In one svelte movement, the class swung around and stared at me.

“No fair,” I said, holding up my hands in mock protest. Jeannie grabbed my elbow and tugged on it. I reluctantly stood and gave her my seat.

“One more time. One more time,” Lightning and John chanted.

I could feel the tide turning. I was moments away from my doom. *Would it be less embarrassing to use upper or lower case letters?* I glanced at my watch. It was too early to dismiss the class. I glanced around the room. Tom and Violet (who were also one out away from a penalty) looked tortured. Their arms were outstretched like athletes on the starting blocks. Their butts hovered in the air, only the smallest percentage touching the seats.

If I had to compete with them for a chair, all would be lost. I walked to the opposite side of the room and asked Won, “Do you love your neighbor?”

“No,” he said. The students sitting on each side of him relaxed.

“Who do you love?” Every muscle in my body was keyed for action. I searched out the faces around me. *Whose chair can I grab?*

“I love everyone who is wearing glasses,” he replied with a wicked smile.

Only four students were wearing glasses and they were on the other side of the room. John and Sally quickly traded places. That left Silver Stone, Jack and me. Jack lunged into Silver Stone’s chair.

Silver Stone and I both zeroed in on the last desk. Silver Stone had a head start. He stretched one fist out in front of him, the other trailed behind. His knees were bent and his face had the determination of a runner at the finish line. But I was not going to give up. I hiked up my miniskirt, pushed back on the tips of my toes, and dived for the chair. For a moment, time stood still. I floated in the air between victory and humiliation. Then, with all

the grace and delicacy of a football player, I threw myself across the metal desk one moment before Silver Stone landed across my back.

“So sorry,” Silver Stone murmured as he leaped up and tugged on my elbow. I was draped over the chair like a child waiting to be punished. I dropped to my knees and slowly stood up. The room quieted. Everyone was leaning forward staring at me. The women’s faces were soft and worried. The men shifted uncomfortably while Silver Stone hovered over me, afraid to touch me.

“I’m safe,” I shouted exuberantly, dropping into the chair. I felt like I had hit a home run, made the last touchdown, shot the game-winning basket.

“Good job,” Silver Stone said, clasping me on the back, grinning.

I knew I had arrived.

Nicknames

Why did you choose your nickname?*

I want to save a princess. *Knight*

One day I was studying ToEIC. I watched the word, "The milky way" in the book. I was attracted by it. So I chose it. *Milky*

I chose my nickname "Zo." I named after Alonzo Mourning. He is NBA player. He is my favorite player. So I chose it. But my English teacher misunderstand my pronunciation. My nickname now is thanks to the support of my teacher. *Joe*

It is so easy to say and to memory. *Sally*

It's small Island Home in California. I've never been there, But I would like to go there Someday. Maybe this year.... *Catalina*

It is catholic name. I love the God. So my name is given to me by him. *Savina*

I like a passion magazine. It's name is "Cindy the penky". So I choose it. *Cindy*

I went to the R.O.K NAVY. So my friend is made to me. It is important to me. He is the best friend. *Sea*

I mean my name a fairy. In high school, my friend call me tingerbe. *Tingerbel*

I like Korea popular singer name of "Country CoCo" The group's famous sing is "Oh my Julia." It is very interesting. *Julia*

I like ice cream. *Cream*

England princes' name is Charles. My family name is Hwang. That's to say "Hwang" means prince. So, I chose Charlie than Charles, because it's easy to be called. *Charlie*

Mr Hwang, Everyday he says to me "hey Hong." So I chose. *Hong*

Last year my best friend went to army. On April he had holiday. Last winter I wait expectantly for it. *April*

Just easy, first I want a nickname Nick or Jack But the other people choose it so I select this. Nill or Neil? What is right? *Nill*

* Survey results of students at SDA Language institute in Pusan given in March 2001.

I like exciting character. KiD is exciting comic book character. I live KiD. *KiD*

My mind color is white. *White*

My favorite love story is 'Romeo and Juliet' so I chose it. *Julie*

When I was a junior, I met an English woman. She gave me the name after model. *Claudia*

I like 'Jim Kelly', he is an actor. He is very humourous and interesting. *Jim*

"Orange Peaco' is my favorite tea's name and my favorite comic book characker." In short, "Peaco" is my nickname. *Peaco*

Truthfully, I didn't have any idea about making English name, So My friend made it for me. I like this name. *Ted*

I like sun, sunshine, and sunflowers. *Sunny*

I wached the movie "Robbin Hoot" and I was impressed the movie, so I was decided to make a my nickname to "Robbin", that's all. *Robbin*

I like Wonderland Alice. Alice is actor in novel. *Alice*

I just choose it. The name of Kevin is familiar with everybody. It means "loveable" and "?". I forgot another meaning. *Kevin*

It is Hong Kong movie star's English name and very simple name. Some people think Andy is man's name. But you don't think them. I like my English nick name. *Andy*

My friend's baptismal name is Gabriel and the name is angel name. *Gabriel*

Erick menas "ruler" I found it in the internet site. I'll rule the world. *Erick*

He is the main character's name in the SF novel. He is very inteligent and he love history like me. So I choosed this name. *Yan*

In the past, When I was attend other institute, one guy use this nickname. At that time, I liked his nickname. So I decided this nickname. *Konan*

I like star. Spica is star's name in Virgo. *Spica*

I was a Kevin last level but here is a one person the same nickname. So I determined to change my nickname. It's a Tommy. I just like this name. It's one of the good brands. Clothes, back pack, bag, and so on. *Tommy*

Reds and Blues

There is a small Buddhist temple halfway up the mountain behind my apartment in South Korea. Its primary colors are barely visible through the pine trees. It is very small, this temple. I have never seen a monk here, a nun or even a pilgrim inside, though the courtyard is always swept, the cypress shrubs trimmed into meticulous round balls, the candles burn continuously in front of a chiseled Buddha with large eyes and serene hands.

I guess it's strange that I like to come here. As a protestant missionary, I should feel more comfortable praying in front of a hard wooden pew. But, I am drawn to this small Buddhist temple. I think it is the tranquility, the mountain air, the tall pines, the view of Pusan city that stretches all the way to the Sea of Japan. I must also admit, Buddhism intrigues me. Not so much the beliefs, but the followers who are still renouncing everything. In my own church last Sabbath, I held the corner of a hymnal and loudly sang, "I Surrender All." Yet I'm not so sure I really have.

I remember one afternoon on the bottom of a different mountain, when I met a Buddhist nun. She stood in the doorway of the temple's kitchen, her arms outstretched, her fingers worn and wrinkled pressed against the doorframe. She wore a long gray jacket tied at the waist over quilted gray pants. Her head was shaved smooth. Deep lines surrounded her pursed lips and she looked out at us with tranquil eyes.

I was standing in the rain with my sister and two friends. We wore plastic blue tarps tied across our backs like superhero capes. Water flowed down our faces and arms and bare legs. Clumps of orange mud clung to our hiking boots. We had spent the morning climbing Seobeck Mountain, charmed by the winding trails lined with bamboo and wild flowers. When we reached the top, there was no mountain view, only mist. All this time, we had been

walking through clouds. Gradually though, the soft vapor melted into rain, the flowers gave way to craggy rocks, and the trail turned into mud. Our socks grew soggy; our backpacks began to rub against our shoulders. So we turned and followed a different, smaller trail as it meandered down the mountain toward this tiny, secluded temple.

“*Ahsa ohseyo*,” the nun said, beckoning for us to follow. We left our backpacks under the eave and carefully stepped over the wooden threshold. The kitchen was dark and smoky. There was no electricity. A black wood-burning stove smoldered in the middle of the room. She motioned for us to sit at a small table. There were only four chairs so we stood awkwardly, each person trying to give up a seat. The nun turned her back on us and walked over to a water basin. She filled a tin pot, carried it over to the stove, and squatted next to the fire—her bare feet flat against the wooden floor.

As the nun waited for the water to boil, I watched her. There were wrinkles at the nape of her neck. Her shoulders slumped forward, her spine curved. She looked up at the wooden ceiling and began to hum. I tried to imagine her in this temple every day—in the shadow of a mountain, surrounded by cherry trees and tranquility. I wondered if she ever longed for chaos, for the sound of traffic, or for a husband with silver hair and a gentle laugh. Did she ever miss wearing reds and blues and pretty shoes that weren’t a bit sensible? Mostly, I wondered why she had chosen this.

I tried to picture her at my age, her hair long and thick. Maybe she bit her nails when she was nervous and then hid them in the folds of her skirt or flirted with the neighbor’s boy. And late in the autumn, she must have helped her mother make kimchi in their backyard. Together they put seasoned cabbage in clay jars that were as high as the curve of her hip.

I stared at the nun, searching for some sign of a romantic past. I'm not sure what I expected—a girlish gesture, a fluttering of eyelashes, an attempt to smooth back hair that was lost a long time ago. Instead, she grunted loudly and then stood up. With her back still to us, she lifted the pot out of the stove and began to pour steaming water into mugs. With practiced turns of her wrist, she managed to be both efficient and serene.

I tapped both feet on the wooden floor and watched, already creating an imaginary scenario for her. I pictured her in a small village, leaning against a kimchi jar. The sky a deep blue, an autumn breeze blowing. Her face is raised to the heavens, her black hair swinging in the air. The neighbor's boy pauses to watch. She turns to him and smiles. She doesn't notice that his arms hang awkwardly at his side or he turns red every time she speaks. She sees only that his eyes are perfect. They stand together by the kimchi jars and talk until her mother leans out the window and raps on the wooden shutters. The girl goes inside humming, her eyes melting every time she thinks of him.

How is it that she decided to become a nun? Did she begin to question her existence as the snow fell around her house in gentle drifts? I could easily picture her sitting on the warm kitchen floor, her back against the wall, her chin cupped in both palms. The space between her eyebrows creased as she tries to make sense of an endless cycle of birth and pain, of desire and suffering. And in the end she decides that the answer is to give it all up, to let go of every hope, every want, every longing.

But that's the part I had trouble with. Could she give it all up because of a few dreamy afternoons when the sound of snow filled her ears? It's easier to believe that there was a cataclysmic event. The storytellers of old would say that the brown-eyed boy with straight teeth and stubborn hair left one morning with his friends and never returned. But

every tranquil nun cannot be escaping from a past scarred by calamity. It's just as likely that she chose a life of simplicity, she chose to abandon her desires, she chose to live in this simple temple, with no electricity and no running water. She chose to seek nirvana

I wondered, though. Did she cry when they shaved her long black hair? Did she clench her fists and watch it fall to the ground in shiny clumps? Or did she shut her eyes tightly, trying not to think about the razorblade that was moving across her scalp in slow, even strokes?

That afternoon, the nun fed us sticky rice. She set out small round bowls, each with a different side dish inside—fresh tofu, mountain roots, bean sprouts, kimchi, wilted spinach, jelled acorn. She spoke quietly. She smiled when I used my chopsticks to pick up mouthfuls of rice. Most of the time, her face was placid, the wrinkles set in comfortable lines. She never did sit down. Instead she floated through the kitchen, refilling our mugs with hot tea. When we were done eating, she collected the bowls and ushered us out of the kitchen. She did it all so smoothly that we didn't even realize we had been dismissed.

The four of us stepped out of the dark kitchen and blinked at the afternoon light. It had stopped raining and everything looked wet and new. Water dripped from the upturned corners of the temple roofs, glistening on bushes and green blades of grass. I stood with my hands on my hips and looked out at this tiny temple in the woods. Red columns marked the doorways and gates. The roof was gray slate. The wooden walls were covered with painted murals of Buddha's life. Golds and yellows and greens and pinks and reds and blues swirled in dramatic storytelling.

I turned to the others. They were wiggling into their wet backpacks. I bent down and grabbed mine by a threadbare strap that had been bleached and worn by the sun. I slid the pack over both shoulders and adjusted the fastenings.

The nun remained motionless in the doorway. She was surrounded by brilliant colors, her gray robe tied firmly around her waist. We bowed and thanked her in our most polite Korean. She raised one hand in farewell and then stood to watch as we walked down the dirt road toward the nearest town. A long time ago, she had chosen to stay.

Wishing on the New Year's Sun

I push one leg in front of the other and try to pretend that the fierce chill and starless sky are all part of an elaborate dream, that at any minute I'll wake up in a warm bed with flannel sheets. Instead, wind blows across the ridge, shrieking past boulders and dark trees. I brace my legs and burrow my neck down into the cinched collar of my coat. The icy wind hits my exposed cheeks and cuts across my squinted eyes until they water. I swipe at them with empty fingers. My hands are balled up in the palms of my thick woolen gloves. The knitted fingers hang down like a mirage.

Dim dots of light bounce up and down the ridge for as far as I can see, until the morning darkness swallows up the quiet stream of hikers that rise toward the summit. Ten paces ahead I can pick out the black silhouette of my sister against the charcoal morning. She vanishes into thick clouds that hover so close I feel certain that she can reach up and grab fistfuls of frozen vapor. But slowly the charcoal turns to gray, the mist turns to air and my big sister begins to emerge like a Polaroid picture. Now I can see the tip of her hood. Now I can see a tint of green in her jacket. Now I can see the slouch of her shoulders, the knit of her gloves, the sass in her step. The images come faster, clearer. When we started hiking two hours ago, it was so dark that I could only see the arc of her flashlight on the frozen trail.

"Hurry up," Sonja calls out in front of me. "We'll miss the sunrise."

"I'm coming," I say, pushing my toes against the spine of Chiri *san*. Chiri (pronounced Jeer-ee) is the second highest mountain in South Korea. I'm not sure how many kilometers are left, but I know we'd better hurry if we're going to make it to the highest peak. It's not enough just being on the mountain. The Korean legend says you have to watch the

New Year's sunrise from Chiri's summit to have a lucky year. And we could both use a little luck.

Sonja was twenty-four when she left for South Korea and taught English in Chongju. She had only planned on staying a year, but she became so enchanted with Korea that the year stretched into two, which stretched into three. Six months ago, she decided to stay indefinitely. She had just been hired as a professor at Kyung Nam junior college, and she was ready to announce her engagement to Byeong su.

When Sonja first left home, our parents were supportive. They were proud of their adventurous daughter. My father even bought a couple pairs of chopsticks and began to teach her how to use them. I wanted to learn too. I remember the three of us sitting around our dining room table. My dad, who grew up in Hawaii, clicked his chopsticks rapidly in the air while my sister and I giggled. Our chopsticks hung at odd angles before finally slipping out of our fingers and clattering onto the dark veneer of the table. "You hold one as the base and the other like a pencil," he said, showing us the right placement. My fingers bunched around the chopsticks with the grace of a four-year-old printing for the first time. Sonja just sat and watched. She bit her lower lip and followed my father's fingers with her eyes. When she tried again, her chopsticks danced with an air of serenity.

I guess I could say that I was mesmerized by her skill, her elegance. But actually, I think I was a little jealous. I might have felt different if I had known that Sonja was going to be gone for a long time. As it was, I don't even remember the day she left. I don't remember the trip to the airport or saying goodbye, though I'm certain I went. I probably hung back and tried to look cool while my parents gave her long hugs and last minute advice—don't eat anything raw unless you peel it yourself, don't put all your money in your wallet.

And then she was gone.

Letters spun back and forth, systematic placements of the alphabet that tried to capture a mood, a trip, a disappointment—but finally settled on something less. I didn't realize how much less until Sonja came to visit for Christmas two and a half years later. At first I thought nothing had changed. She looked the same. Her brunette hair was still shoulder-length and permed into tight curls. Her heart-shaped face was powdered and painted with Clinique's finest products. She looked like Athletic Barbie, a doll who could climb mountains and run marathons but always kept a compact handy.

I was a senior in college at the time. I had never followed a face cleansing regiment or owned department store makeup. My hair was cut into a short bob, and it stayed straight when I was lucky. I had never run twenty-six miles and I never planned to. But I did play basketball and football, sports she avoided. As different as we were, we had a lot more in common. We had the same thin hair, the same snubbed nose, the same tendency to gain weight on our stomachs, the same competitive spirit, the same drive for perfection.

When we were little, Sonja had been my queen. We built Lego cities together and drew paper dolls. She taught me how to read, how to do a backwards somersault, how to hide in a suitcase. I would do anything for her. Once, she ordered me to steal boxes of Jell-O out of our kitchen cabinet. A week later, my parents found the ripped up packages in my room. When they confronted me, I took the blame silently. I don't even remember feeling bitter.

She did a lot for me too. The first time she got a job babysitting, she bought me candy with part of her pay. The first time I got grounded, she stayed home with me. We sat

on the couch watching videos. Later, when I was the college yearbook editor, she brought me chocolate before every deadline.

We were typical sisters. We laughed at the same jokes, shared the same memories. We knew each other better than anyone else. And now that Sonja was back from Korea, we stayed up late talking. She sat cross-legged on my bedroom carpet. She ran her fingers through the beige fiber and listened as I prattled about my classes, my friends, the latest dramas in my life. She nodded and asked insightful questions. When I finally paused, she dropped the bombshell. “I’ve been dating this Korean guy.”

“Wow, that’s awesome,” I said. But in reality, I was shocked. *How could she not tell me before?*

Ignoring my gaping mouth, she smiled and pulled out her wallet. “It’s quite serious,” she said as she passed me a small photo. I held it close to my face and peered down at this stranger. A confident man stared back. His arms were crossed over a ripped muscle shirt. A gold chain glistened around his neck. His black hair was parted in the center, two half circles draped over his forehead like a parted curtain that was tied back at the ears. His eyes were half-closed and the corners of his mouth curved up into a smug half smile. If I were shown ten pictures of possible boyfriends and told to choose one for Sonja, he would have been my last pick. Every time. My lips pulled back into a smile.

“What’s he like?” I asked, returning the picture.

Her face softened, her eyes shimmered and her hands flew in extended arcs as words tumbled out of her mouth. He was wonderful. Everything she had ever wanted—intelligent, humorous, perceptive, honest, hopelessly in love with her, a true romantic. My shoulders began to relax under the stream of superlatives.

They had met at SDA language institute, she said. He needed someone to edit a research paper. She wasn't his teacher, but he wondered whether she had any free time. He said he chose her because she was the smartest teacher at the institute, the kindest teacher. That night he took her out to dinner to thank her for all the hard work. They started dating a couple days later. They had been seeing each other now for six months.

Even though Sonja said they were serious, I never thought I would meet this boyfriend. I had no plans to visit Korea and she had never dated anyone for very long. I used to tease her about being fickle—more with majors, though, than boyfriends. While she didn't care much for the boys she had dated, she had been passionate about every major she tried. By the time she graduated, she had gone through seven majors in four years and she ended up being the university's only pre-med Fitness and Wellness major. But she never took the MCAT. She changed her mind about that, too. Teaching in Korea was the only thing she had stuck with. None of us expected Byeong su to last for long. But five months later, Sonja was still dating Byeong su. And I was going to meet him.

I never thought I would live in Korea. I had planned on teaching at a language school in Prague. There I could get reacquainted with my European relatives. I could visit cathedrals and museums. I could sip coffee in front of a small café. Though it seems hard to believe now, I didn't consider South Korea until after Sonja e-mailed me.

Guess what? I found you a job in Pusan. Mom and Dad will probably freak, you know, the enchantment of Korea and all that. But I'd really love to have you here. You'd only have to sign a year's contract.

• • •

If I took the job, I would be teaching at the same language institute she had met Byeong su at. We wouldn't be living together since she now worked across town, but we would have plenty of chances to see each other.

When I told my parents that Sonja wanted me to teach in Korea, they listened and, uncharacteristically, they said nothing. I responded uncharacteristically by asking for advice. But all they would say was, "It's your choice." For two weeks, I obsessed over the decision. I thought about it during lectures, during lunch, during basketball games. I conferred with my roommate for hours until she must have wanted to buy earplugs or move out. But finally, after all the turmoil, I just knew. That night I called my parents and told them I was going to Korea. My mother let out a deep breath. "Thank God," she said. She felt certain that Byeong su was bad news.

"I don't get what the problem is," I told my mom a couple weeks before I left for Korea. We stood in the kitchen preparing vegetables for stew. "Sonja says he's really nice." As a loyal sister, I felt I should defend her choices. I wasn't willing to admit that I too thought Byeong su looked sleazy.

"I don't know," she said. "It just seems like there's a missing piece. Why would she hide their relationship for so many months? It doesn't add up." My mom held up the carrot she was peeling. "Mark my words, there's something strange. You just need to keep your eyes open," she said, shaking the carrot at me.

"You worry too much," I said, blinking hard against the onion fumes. "I think he sounds wonderful." And I tried to believe it.

But meeting Byeong su only confirmed my doubts. If there's such a thing as love at first sight, this was its perfect opposite. A few days after I arrived in Korea, my sister and I

were to meet him for lunch. We waited in front of a quaint, vine-covered restaurant. The sun floated directly above us. Sweat trickled down my back and even my hands felt sticky. Several minutes passed before I saw him walking toward us. I nudged my sister. "Is that him?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said.

Byeong su stood on one side of the road. My sister and I stood on the other. Cars raced between us, their chrome glistening in the sun. We smiled and waved. He grinned and jumped up and down, brandishing both arms over his head in erratic circles. His mouth opened as if to say something, but all I could hear was the roar of traffic.

"So, what do you think?" Sonja asked.

"He looks friendly," I replied, my stomach tightening. There was something almost sinister about his too wide smile, his gushy friendliness.

"He really wants you to like him," she said, pointing her chin in his direction. I looked over and watched as he bounded across the street and headed toward us.

"It's so nice to meet you," I said, sticking out my hand. He grinned, but he only extended four limp fingers. He gave my sister a high five and then followed us into the Japanese restaurant.

A prim hostess led us over to a small corner table. We followed single file, Byeong su bringing up the rear. I smiled as we passed a young couple. They leaned toward each other, their chopsticks floating through the air in time to the background music. When we reached our table, I sat on the far end. Sonja and Byeong su sat facing me. The waitress handed us three menus written in Korean. Byeong Su and Sonja studied them with interest, while I tried to see if I recognized any letters. I didn't.

“You’ve got to try *yoobu cho bob*,” my sister, said looking up.

“Okay, *bob* is rice, but what’s *uboob chun*?” I asked.

“It’s a thin tofu pocket filled with rice and sesame seeds and stuff,” my sister said. “I know you’re gonna love it. I could eat a whole plate.”

“Just Sari should get,” Byeong Su said. He leaned towards Sonja, a knowing look in his eyes. “You know the tofu is fried.”

“So what,” I said, laughing.

“Your sister, she has big stomach,” Byeong Su said in a matter of fact way.

I glanced over at Sonja. She was wearing short shorts and a fitted t-shirt. Her now blond hair was straight and tucked behind her ears. She looked confident, happy. But here was Byeong su calling her fat. I couldn’t fit the pieces together.

“She must eat only a little bit, regular meals, something healthy,” Byeong su continued.

I had been taught to smile politely at strangers even when I was upset. I could be counted on to avoid a scene, to not embarrass someone in public. But now I felt more anger than I thought I was capable of.

“What?” I said between clenched teeth. I could hear the blood pounding in my ears. I could feel the heat on my face. I pushed my fingers into the table. “My sister looks wonderful.”

“Ah, you don’t understand my heart,” Byeong su said, unruffled. “I am saying a medical fact, not insult.” I bit my tongue and looked away. “I like your sister,” he added to Sonja, but she said nothing. Her lips were pressed together and she looked straight ahead. Small wrinkles puckered up between her eyebrows.

As the months slipped by, I grew to expect the look. She wore it every time I “misunderstood” Byeong su’s heart. Her shoulders would tense. Her eyes would glaze over. Her lips would crush together until they began to turn white around the corners. She would fold inward until she was no longer a person.

Byeong su was not bashful about insulting my sister. Once they visited my apartment together and for several hours we chatted pleasantly. Byeong su had brought me a kilo of grapes and as we ate them and talked, my feelings toward him mellowed. I loved Korean grapes, which are bigger and sweeter than American ones, but also have to be peeled. I was touched by his thoughtfulness. But as the three of us were discussing relationships, Byeong su turned to me and said, “I can’t trust your sister. She’s always lying.” His face was steady and he seemed to expect me to react as nonchalantly. Sonja stared down at the plate of grape peels that was set on the coffee table. She acted as if she couldn’t understand the conversation, as if it didn’t concern her.

Later, when I asked her about it, she turned on me like a tiger defending her cub. “Stop it,” she shouted. “I love him and you’re going to have to get used to it. I’m so tired of you attacking him.”

I gave in at first. I didn’t want to fight with my sister. I didn’t want to upset her. So I stared at my hands, embarrassed. Later though, I began to tell her that he was no good. I would say that he didn’t respect her, that he was scary. But as soon as the words came out of my mouth, they hit the air and shattered.

“Why does it have to be so hard?” she would say, shredding a piece of Kleenex and swiping at her eyes with a closed fist.

At night I would ask myself the same question. I would gaze at the ceiling, determined to make things better, to get along better. But the next morning I would wake up and discover that he had stolen money from her account or broken her stereo in a moment of rage.

At first, her friends, my new friends, would also try to intervene. They would delicately hint that Byeong su was not a nice man and that she could find someone better. She never softened. Instead, her shoulders would square, her eyes would blaze, and she would coldly thank them for their concern. It was her and Byeong su against the world.

Somewhere along the way our friends stopped trying. They grew resigned to the inevitable. I clenched my hands in anger—ready to battle alone, to save my sister. But as time slipped by, I also began to relent, my fists slowly unfurling. If she married Byeong su I would have to accept him.

By now it was December. I'd lived in Korea over six months. I was halfway through my stay and time was slipping by. Sonja and I had never had a chance to enjoy each other's company. So we started making appointments to meet more often—to go shopping, watch a movie, eat supper, or just hang out. We chatted about teaching and friends and living in Korea. Byeong su was pushed to the periphery of our conversations, always there but rarely mentioned.

On the first day of my Christmas vacation, we met to go card shopping. I was supposed to meet her in front of the stationery store at 7 p.m. But when I finally pushed through the weekend crowds, I was about fifteen minutes late. I craned my neck until I glimpsed her. She was standing to the side of the store, wearing a wool coat buttoned high against her soft scarf. Her cheeks and nose were flushed red, and she was stomping her boots

against the sidewalk. I watched as her eyes searched through the crowd, flickering past schoolgirls in blue and white uniforms, past businessmen talking on cell phones, past sauntering couples. When she finally saw me, she smiled big.

“Well, hi Miss cold thing,” I said, walking up to her. “Sorry I’m late.”

“Whatever,” she said, laughing as she pushed through the glass doors of the store. A bell on the handle jangled as we entered. “You know what I was thinking?”

“What?” I asked.

“I was thinking that we should get mom and dad the twelve days of Christmas. You know, a card for every day.” She loosened her scarf and began unbuttoning her coat.

“Wow,” I said, taking off my mittens and shoving them into my coat pocket. “That’d be awesome!”

Our mission determined, we started browsing through the aisles of cards. There was Santa sitting in a steaming bath having his back scrubbed, pop-up Santa playing basketball, Korean children bowing for New Year’s money, a romantic couple falling into each other’s arms, jagged mountains with pear shaped cranes flying overhead.

“Hey, look at this one,” I said, handing Sonja a glossy card. Santa and Rudolph were leaning over the bow of the Titanic. Santa’s arms were looped around Rudolph’s waist. Rudolph’s arms were extended and around his neck hung a huge ruby.

“That’s pretty funny,” she giggled, “but they haven’t seen *Titanic*. What do you think of this?” She handed me a flat, matte finished card. Six dancers in *humboks* (Korea’s traditional costume) leapt and spun on top of a snow covered hill. Behind them a huge red sun was beginning to rise.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Cute, but not that Christmasy.”

“Come on. They’re watching the New Year’s sunrise.” She said. “That’s festive.” She looked up at me, her eyes nostalgic. “We should do it. You know that? We should really do it.”

“Yeah, you’re right, we should,” I replied automatically, knowing that the *it* meant climbing Chiri Mountain for New Years.

During her first year in Korea, Sonja had watched the New Year’s sunrise from its summit. I had seen pictures of her grinning at the camera out of a faux fur trimmed hood, her hiking companions pressed in close. The warped film gave their faces a greenish hue, but it also caught absolute triumph. They stood in front of a tall battered sign, their fists raised toward a pale sky.

When Sonja had first shown me the picture she had sighed, “Sari, we have to climb Chiri *san*.” I enthusiastically agreed and began plotting the trip in my head. But now I knew that Byeong su didn’t climb mountains. And he certainly didn’t allow her to take long trips without him. He was reluctant to even let us meet without him.

“Chiri *san* was so awesome,” Sonja said, glancing down at the colorful dancers that twirled across the Christmas card. “Did I ever tell you what happened when the sun came out?”

I shook my head.

“Well, we were all waiting and there were *so* many people. Anyway, when the sun started rising someone began to sing the Korean anthem. And then everyone joined in. It was amazing. I stood there and just started crying.”

I nodded, allowing myself to be sucked in. I pictured Sonja overwhelmed with emotions. I pictured myself standing next to her. In my head, I could hear the Korean

melody rise and fall, feel the joy catching at my throat. I could imagine the sun streaming across the mountain range. I could feel the wind in my hair, the smile on my face.

“I think I was crying because my fingers were so cold,” she said, laughing. I smiled back, not really believing her.

• • •

Though I had wanted to go somewhere special, I ended up staying in Pusan over Christmas vacation. Byeong su was starting a new business and he wanted Sonja and I to help with advertising. On Christmas Eve we attended a promotional party. It was there, amid festive lights and clientele, that he announced our plans for passing out brochures the next day. I munched on sugar cookies and fumed. That night, I called Sonja on the phone and told her that I was not going. Christmas was for celebrating Christ’s birth; it was for warm feelings and good food. It was for family. It was not for standing on cold street corners and handing out fliers. Sonja hissed back that if Christmas was for families, then I should be willing to help. Furious, I hung up.

As it turned out, I couldn’t have gone anyway. I woke up Christmas morning feeling sick. Too proud to call Sonja, I spent the day alone. I lay curled up on the heated floor of the apartment, my face pressed into the warm linoleum. One eyeball was level with a clumsy horizon that buckled and cracked across the span of my room. I hugged my stomach and gazed at the underside of my dresser. Strands of dust hung down like a silk scarf draped over bare shoulders. The curves of the four sturdy legs were dusted with powder. Like a white Christmas, I thought. With my face squished up against the floor, it made perfect sense.

When my stomach started heaving, I half ran half-stumbled into the bathroom and puked into the toilet. My shoulders jerked. My eyes burned. I gagged and spat and finally

wiped my mouth with a fist full of toilet paper. I reached towards the sink. My fingers tightened around the cold porcelain edge. I pulled myself up, turned on the water and scooped up handfuls. I glanced at the mirror. Languid eyes gazed back. Shaggy hair fell across a pasty face. Water dribbled down my chin.

It should never have been like this. Last Christmas, I had been wearing red lipstick and making pastry with my mom. The house had been full of warm smells—apple pie, homemade bread, cinnamon rolls. White lights had twinkled in our living room. Stockings hung over a smoldering fireplace. But here in Pusan, my apartment was bare. There was no Christmas tree, no cookies baking in the oven, no holly, no ivy. And worst of all, there was no one to fill in this vast nothingness. With a sigh, I reached for my toothbrush and started brushing my teeth, my tongue, the blotchy roof of my mouth. I scrubbed harder and harder against the yellow taste of vomit.

I dropped onto the tiled floor of the bathroom and crawled into the living room. I pushed my arms and legs with anger. I reached up for the phone and pulled it to the floor. I punched at the round plastic buttons.

“Sonja,” I whispered into her pager, my rage reduced to this. “Please call me back, I’m not feeling too well. I think I’ve got the flu or something. Anyway, please call me back soon. Okay?” I hated the whiney edge to my voice, the drawn out pleases. The need so tangible that it hung in the air between us.

• • •

Two hours later, I was staring up at the drip, drip drip of a saline bag. The thin capillary tube twisted its way down the pole and into the vein on my arm. Sonja sat on a tall

swivel stool beside me. Her arms were wrapped around her body, her teeth were chattering.

The doors to the emergency room had been left wide open.

“Take one of my blankets,” I said, motioning with my free arm.

“I’m fine.” She clenched her teeth to stop the chattering.

“Just take it,” I said shivering myself. With three blankets piled over my jeans, sweater and jacket, I was still cold. Sonja only had a light jacket tossed over a sweater designed more for style than warmth. Perched on the edge of the stool she reminded me of the birds that would come to our feeder in the winter. Their bare legs were exposed to blustery winds. Their delicate feet would curl around icy wood. Once, when I was little, I told my mom that I wanted to knit them leg warmers and she laughed.

Sonja seemed determined to suffer, perhaps to atone for her negligence. She sat with me and shivered for hours. Her shoulders started to slump forward, her hands turned white around the slim magazine she had brought to read me. Finally, at two a.m. she rested her elbows on the foot of my bed and cradled her head in her hands. I stared up at the saline bag and willed it to empty.

At four a.m. I was discharged. The doctor never was certain what was wrong with me. It might have been the flu; it might have been food poisoning. He gave me some pills that apparently could work for either. The label was a cryptic paragraph of Korean characters. “Take one after you eat,” the doctor called out as we left the ER and pushed into the howling wind. Sonja and I reached the deserted street and jumped from foot to foot as we tried to flag down a taxi. When we finally arrived home, I fell into bed exhausted.

I slept until noon the next day and when I woke up, Sonja was gone. A heavy blanket was crumpled at one end of the couch. A pillow lay on the other end. She had gone to

church, gone to watch Byeong su get baptized. Ever since they started dating, she had been silently waiting for this day. I'm sure she imagined that she would sit proudly in the front—her hair immaculate, her dress stylish. Instead, she ended up attending church in the same jeans and sweater she had worn to the hospital.

She later told me that Byeong su had arrived after her. He acknowledged her with his eyes but then went to sit with a friend. She was tired, grumpy. I imagine that she crossed her legs, one foot pedaling the air in annoyance. When Byeong su stood up to give his testimony, she might have crossed her arms and stifled a yawn. She later said she didn't cry or even care during his baptism. She just stared straight ahead, lining up the right words in her head.

I never got to hear those words. I lay impatiently on the couch wrapped in the same blanket she had slept under. I stared at the minutes and then hours as they ticked by. When I finally heard her push open the front door, I propped myself up on one elbow. "It's about time," I called out. "It's not like I'm sick or anything. Nope, don't worry about me."

My sarcasm was cut short when Sonja rounded the corner. Her cheeks were blotchy, her eyes red and puffy.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I broke up with Byeong su," she said, sitting down.

I lay there stunned, not sure what to say. I only knew I wasn't going to say I was sorry. "Well good," I finally stammered.

"But it's so hard." Tears welled up in her eyes and started to slip down her cheeks. "I just feel so bad for him. I don't know what he's going to do," she said, choking on the last few words. She reached for a tissue and blew her nose. I leaned over and rubbed her back.

“He’ll be fine,” I said quickly, my stomach tightening. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. This was not the right attitude. This kind of talk would lead to reconciliation.

“You didn’t see him.” She hiccupped. Fat tears were now streaming down her face, dripping off her nose and chin. “I feel so bad. I never meant to hurt him.” She blew her nose and swiped at her tears with the back of her hands.

She grabbed another tissue and began to tell me how they had gotten in the car after church, each of them slamming the door. How for miles they rode in silence—Sonja staring out the passenger seat window, Byeong su driving too fast. Finally, she told him that it wasn’t going to work. Her family didn’t like him. Her friends didn’t like him. He was yanking her away from everything she cared about and then abandoning her to solitude. He didn’t treat her right. They couldn’t stay together.

As hard as I tried, I couldn’t imagine the conversation. Byeong su quiet? Sonja assertive? I looked down now at her bent head. Her shoulders began to shake and she started to crumple. “He said he would change,” she whispered. “He said he would change.”

I rubbed her shoulders and told her that she had done the right thing. I told her that he would never change. She nodded her head and gulped back tears. Finally, she straightened her back, lifted her chin and stood up.

“Let’s get away from here.” She started to pace the living room. “Let’s do something crazy.” Her face was still red and puffy, her eyes bloodshot. But her voice was bright and she was gesturing enthusiastically.

“Great,” I said.

“Let’s climb Chiri Mountain,” she said. “Let’s wish on the New Year’s sun.”

• • •

As I dig each foot into Chiri Mountain, my jeans crinkle like sheets of ice. The cotton mask that covers and warms my mouth is damp from condensed breath. But my fingers are the worst. When I try to straighten and bend them inside the woolen gloves, they feel dry and brittle like rice paper.

Sonja pauses in front of me. I stumble to catch up, but my knees buckle as another gust of wind slams into us.

“You okay?” she asks.

“Just slow this morning,” I reply.

“You sure?” I can hear a twinge of concern.

“Yeah,” I pump my arms up into the air and do a stiff jig. “Hey, I’m glad we came.” I smile with my eyes over the top of the white mask. Even though I still feel weak. Even though I can no longer feel my toes, I mean it.

Up ahead I can see the top of the summit. It’s not a rounded dome or a pointed triangle. It’s craggier. Large rocks jut out from the mountain like fingers.

Sonja pauses by the final hill. While I am wheezing and groping for each step, she is glowing. The wind howls against her teeth, but she can’t stop smiling. Her eyes shine, her cheeks glow. I’ve seen that look before.

We climb up together, our steps falling in unison. We don’t talk. We just climb. One foot in front of the other. We pass dwarf pines that look like so many fragments of a single Christmas tree. Their trunks push toward the sky despite the wind. But their branches have become the wind’s fingerprints, bending away from the invisible gusts that howl down the mountain ridge.

When we reach the top, the sky is pale. The sun has not yet risen. Other hikers are huddled against looming rocks, shoulders hunched, hands shoved into pockets. We find our own rock and peer into the east searching for the sun. And we wait.

It's cold waiting. Sonja covers her mouth with her gloved hands. I burrow my neck into my coat. We only see dark clouds in the sky, no faint pink, no ray of light.

"The clouds are going to block the sunrise," I predict.

"Maybe," Sonja says.

The sky begins to grow lighter. Flashlights turn off one by one and I can see the faces of the other hikers. They blow into their hands and jump up and down. But there is no sun and so one group turns around and begins climbing down the mountain.

"Can we go?" I ask. I start walking in place, lifting my knees high and waving my hands above my head. Sonja just smiles and leans her back against the rock. She faces the sky and points.

"Look," she says.

I turn around. A sliver of yellow, the size of a fingernail, rises above the horizon. A beam of light explodes out of the sliver and illuminates the mountain ridge below us. A sea of peaks stretches out for miles. I turn to look at the other hikers. I expect them to burst into song. Instead, they pull out their Nikons and Canons and begin to take pictures. I look at Sonja. Her faux fur hood is pulled tight around her face. Her nose and cheeks are flushed. She is smiling into the wind, leaning into the sun. We are standing together on top of the mountain and everything is sky.

Flower Jealousy

By their fruits you will know them.

Matthew 7: 16

I stood under a cherry tree, but I didn't notice it right away. Instead, I watched a little girl in the middle of a wooden bridge. Her black hair was pulled back into two pigtails, her cheeks were rosy. She held onto a bag of rice cakes with one chubby fist while the other stretched over the water, dropping crumbs to the goldfish that swam back and forth in the manmade pond below. But when I looked up, I saw the cherries, bright red and tiny. Each stem branched out to hold two fruit, an exact replica of a china pattern I'd once seen. I stood on my tiptoes and stretched toward the lowest branch. My fingertips snagged a leaf and I pulled it low enough to grab a pair. I hesitated a moment before biting into one of them. My mouth puckered and I wrinkled my nose. There was nothing edible about this fruit. These cherry trees of South Korea were all show.

• • •

I came to South Korea because I wanted to be a missionary. I had grown up watching my parents help other people. In Uganda, my father used to lift buckets for the village women who collected water at our rain barrel. My mother gave nutrition lectures at the clinic down the hill. *Cook a nail with the pot of beans to add more iron to the diet. Give children lots of mangos and guavas to eat, even if they're too young to appreciate the taste.* Once we moved to America, I read books about missionaries. My favorite story was about a doctor who tromped through the lush jungles of New Guinea treating snakebites and malaria. I too wanted to be a missionary. I too wanted to help others.

But being a missionary was complicated. I was still me. I giggled during church when the Korean minister talked about the “breast” of God (rather than breath). I clamped my hand over my mouth, but I couldn’t stop my shoulders from shaking. By the end of the sermon, I was wiping away tears from the corners of my eyes. I was twenty-four years old and I was not a solemn person. I wasn’t selfless either. Sometimes, I wanted to buy a box of expensive chocolates and eat every single mocha-filled truffle. But even worse, I was selfish with my time. After teaching seven hours and then grading papers and preparing for class, I felt entitled to a break. I didn’t want to give Bible studies, attend choir practice, or join the Korean prayer meeting. Only later, when I was curled up with a good book or playing basketball would I feel shameful. I truly wanted to be a good missionary.

Teaching Bible class turned out to be both my demise and my salvation. Every teacher at SDA language institute taught one Bible class. Students paid about twenty dollars for the two-month course. Most were not Christians. They took Bible class because they were interested in religion or they liked the teacher, but mainly they took Bible to practice English.

Bible class was my daily opportunity to be a missionary, in spite of myself. And with that chance came all my loaded expectations. I wanted to be the best Bible teacher, the most engaging, the most popular. I wanted my students to be attracted to Christianity in a dynamic, powerful way.

• • •

When I started teaching religion, I was given no guidelines. The only supplies were heavy Bibles and spiral bound songbooks. At first I agonized over what I would teach. I had

never made a lesson plan before, let alone created an entire class. I didn't want my Bible class to be boring or meaningless. I wanted to do something brilliant.

The evening before I was supposed to announce the title of my Bible class, I walked aimlessly through my new neighborhood. I had just arrived in Pusan, and I was struck by the fact that there was no grass—anywhere. The concrete buildings melted right into the black tarmac road. What sounds cheerless, was actually quite the opposite. Wide-open American suburbs can boarder on aloof, but this neighborhood was vibrant. It had all the energy of market day. Most of the buildings were actually shops at street level, while the second and third floors were residential homes. Children in blue and white uniforms played soccer and jumped rope in the narrow streets. Neighbors stood on the corners chatting in front of a tiny bakery.

I stopped at a grocery store and bought some tangerines and Asian pears. I was holding the bags in one hand and paying the shopkeeper with the other when I suddenly knew what I would do for Bible class. The idea arrived with so much clarity and certainty that it was like the sky had rolled back and the answer had fallen down from heaven. I would use drama. I would title my class, "Lights, camera, action." It would be the biggest thing to hit Sumyun SDA Language Institute.

On the first day of Bible class, I explained the project to about twenty college-aged students. They sat up straight and I was certain they were nodding their heads in anticipation. This missionary thing was fantastic. I was going to be innovative, inspiring. I practically beamed as I told my students that during the two-month term we would choose a parable from the New Testament and turn it into a drama. They would get to write out a

script during class. Then they would practice it and, finally, act out the play for Friday night vespers.

After reading several parables, my students chose the one about the wedding feast. In it, a king prepares a huge party for his child's wedding, but when the invitations are sent all the guests have excuses for why they can't come—they're too busy, too tired. Dismayed, the King sends his servants to the alleys and street corners to invite everyone they meet. On the day of the wedding, the hall is filled with guests and the gala is pronounced a triumph. My students thought the story was charming. They loved the rags to riches feel, the edgy message that the least likely people are those who will show up in heaven. I loved the creative possibilities.

For one month, we worked on the script. I divided the class into writing groups and gave each one a different act to produce. Class fell into an easy routine. First we had song service and prayer, then we would write. I serenely floated around the room helping different groups with their characters. Looking back, I can see the warning signs—students drifted to class late, they chatted in Korean instead of writing, they skipped class. But at the time, I was oblivious to the undercurrent of apathy.

• • •

“Can I speak with you for a moment?” Mulder asked me one day after Bible class. With his small face and serious eyebrows, he looked remarkably like Mulder from *X-Files*.

“Sure,” I said. Mulder was outspoken and fun. When he joined my Bible class, I had been delighted.

“You like teaching in Korea?” Mulder asked.

“Yeah,” I said with a half-smile. “I do.” I loved watching my students get excited about English. And they were so friendly. I had been in South Korea a month and already they had taken me to *noribangs* (singing rooms) and bowling alleys. Afterwards, we would go to McDonald’s and laugh over milkshakes and French fries. I taught them how to pop straws. They taught me Korean drinking games, even though I didn’t drink.

“Good. Good,” Mulder said. He seemed uneasy. He glanced around the entrance of the institute. Against one wall hung pictures of each teacher at SDA institute. There were five of us, and my picture was on the far left. When I sat for the photo, I had tried to look like a missionary. I had worn a serious black blouse and had pulled the hair off my face. But with my snubbed nose, freckles and big cheesy smile, my picture looked like it belonged in a high school yearbook, not on the wall of a mission institute.

“Your Bible class is some boring,” Mulder blurted out. His eyes slid across my face and he began to roll up the thin notebook he was holding in his hands. I tried to keep my expressions placid, but I felt like he had punched me in the stomach.

During orientation, I was told that Koreans don’t criticize their teachers, that they are concerned about saving the teacher’s face. Students will even pretend they understand more than they do because confusion would imply that the teacher wasn’t a good instructor. But just like I had studied Korean culture, Mulder had probably studied American culture and he must have learned that Americans cherish frankness.

“We’re going to start practicing the play next week,” I said to him in a wheedling voice. “You’ve all worked so hard at writing the script, I would hate to stop now. Besides, I’m sure class will be more interesting once we start practicing.”

Mulder shuffled his feet against the concrete floor and gazed past me toward the receptionist desk. The window was partially opened, and I could see our secretary bent over the desk writing something. She didn't look up, but I could feel my ears burning.

"Probably tomorrow I won't be in class," Mulder said, shrugging his shoulders. "I'm sorry."

"That's okay," I said. "I'm sure I'll see you around. Anyway, I'm sorry things didn't work out for Bible class." As Mulder walked away, I pressed the elevator button repeatedly. My feet tapped against the floor, and I watched the numbers light up one by one. There were fifteen floors in the building and our institute was on the sixth floor. When the elevator finally arrived, it was empty. I stepped in and exhaled. I felt like I'd been holding my breath for a long, long time.

At that moment, I wanted to stop teaching Bible class. I would have been willing to take a pay cut or teach extra English classes. I would have done anything to avoid watching my religion class melt away because that's what I was certain would happen.

I saw Mulder at SDA institute that night as I was teaching one of my evening classes. The door to my room was open and I was helping a student. We were both bent over her textbook, and I was trying to explain why one could have a few apples, but not a few rice or a few flour. To illustrate, I held out two imaginary apples. Just as I looked up, Mulder hurried past the door, his voice floating down the hall behind him.

"Do you know why Mulder was at school?" I asked Bryan later as we gathered for staff worship. "I've never seen him here at night before."

"Oh, he just joined my Bible class," Bryan said, unaware that Mulder had been my student. Bryan jammed his hands into his pocketed and rocked back and forth on his tennis

shoes, his face lit up. “Isn’t that great? I didn’t want to teach my Bible class at night, but I think God is really blessing.” He looked up at the ceiling, “Thanks.” There was a hint of a smile in his voice, as if he and Jesus were sharing an inside joke. It wasn’t sarcasm, or an attempt to impress me with his piety. It was the real thing.

“Wow, that *is* great, Bryan,” I said trying to swallow jealousy I knew I shouldn’t feel. It didn’t matter that Mulder had left my class. The important thing was that he was still studying Bible, that somebody was teaching him. Yet as much as I hated to admit it, it did matter. It mattered to me. I was a lousy missionary, and I cared deeply for all the wrong reasons.

“How is *your* Bible class?” Clarence asked. Clarence was the teachers’ coordinator and my boss. He had a passion for cleanliness, punctuality and cooking casseroles. Clarence was middle-aged and a more traditional missionary. He led long ornate prayers and often quoted from the Good Book.

“Well, it’s an experience,” I said. Just thinking about Bible class made my stomach clench. But I didn’t want to tell them. I wanted to fix it myself.

In the next few weeks, I tried to renovate the class. Now we only worked on the play three times a week. The other two days, I brought in magazine stories that I hoped the students would be interested in. I led class discussions. But no matter what I tried or how much I prepared, attendance swiftly dropped from twenty students to ten. I began to dread teaching Bible with the same passion I once reserved for studying calculus. I suspected that the students who stayed only did so because they were assigned roles in the drama and they didn’t want to let me down. In only two weeks they were performing the play.

The night before the performance, our lead actress was in a car accident. Claudia had the sweeping stage presence of a movie star. She didn't walk into a room; she conquered it. We had set the wedding feast parable in modern South Korea, and the students had written the role of a Korean opera star (who turned down the invitation) specifically for Claudia. When we had practiced the play, she had belted out arias like a professional. Now her friend dropped by to tell us the bad news. Claudia had broken her arm in the crash and, of course, she wouldn't be able to make the play.

Holding glue sticks and half-finished posters, the rest of the students stood stunned. It was like the *Lucy Show* airing without Lucy. It was inconceivable. Before anyone had a chance to voice their doubts, I reassigned roles.

We had done casting two weeks ago and waiflike Swan had been voted unanimously as the bride. With her pink cheeks and glossy black hair, she made a lovely bride. But the role had no lines. In the last few practices, Swan had been zany—she had even managed to add some depth to a flat character. Now I begged her to be the opera star. When she accepted, I turned to Beth to play the bride. Beth made an unlikely romantic lead. She was nice, the kind of nice that guys dread when it comes to blind dates and innocent lunches. Her face was round and marred by acne, her hair hung in over-pressed curls. Yet Beth was the only girl I could spare. Currently, she had a tiny role as royal servant. She could easily do both, I decided.

• • •

Friday night, the chapel was filled. I could hear a hum of voices all the way down the hall from my classroom. Inside, students were adjusting fake mustaches and reviewing their parts. We had practiced all afternoon and knew the play as well as we were going to. Swan

was the only one I was concerned about. She was wearing a long black dress made of lace. Her face was pinched and she gestured tragically as she mouthed her lines. She looked like a mafia widow.

“You guys ready?” Bryan asked as he peered around the corner. “We’re going to start song service and then you’re on.”

This was the first drama since I arrived at Sumyun SDA language institute. We had vespers every Friday night, and each teacher planned one vespers a month. Most of the time, the teacher told a story with a point. Once, I talked about an Arizona couple who thought they were adopting a stray dog, only after it bit their child did they discover it was a rat. I had found the story in the newspaper. My message was to be wary about what we think we know. For several days students would stop me in the hall and ask if the story really was true. I began to wonder myself.

Bryan was leading song service at the front of our small institute chapel. He earnestly played his guitar while the other teachers sang next to him. They clapped their hands in time to the music. “Jesus Your name is power. Jesus Your name is light. Jesus Your name can break every stronghold. Jesus Your name is life.” It was a favorite song and most of the students knew it. Only a few wrinkled their foreheads and traced the words in their songbooks.

As my students and I slipped into the rear of the church, I began to sing and clap my hands. My elbow caught a stack of hymnbooks, and the top one fell with smack. Students swung around to see what was happening. Mulder, who had actually come to our vespers, was sitting near the back. When he heard the book drop, he looked over his shoulder. For one awkward second, our eyes met.

“Sari’s religion class is going to perform a drama for tonight’s vespers. Let’s give them a big round of applause,” Clarence said. The audience clapped enthusiastically as we walked up to the front and took our places.

The play began with the king announcing his daughter’s engagement. The king was played by Duk—a stocky college student with a fascination for sports cars. He pronounced the good news with less excitement than the weatherman giving the weekend forecast. As royal servant, Beth was supposed to invite the guests. But nobody could hear what she was saying, her voice was lost behind a bushy fake mustache. Students began to shift in their seats and a few people’s eyes glazed over. I had so much wanted this to be a success. If not for me, for the students who had stuck it out. Maybe they won’t notice, I thought, gauging Duk and Beth for a reaction.

Beth never looked up. She ambled across the stage, apparently mesmerized by the gray tile floor. I wished fiercely that she were less wholesome and more flamboyant. I should have given the part to someone else, anyone else. I should have taken it myself, I thought. Swan the opera star waited at the other end of the platform. She wrung her hands and looked tragic. The mood was somber. Beth was halfway across the platform when she looked up, startled. Everyone’s eyes widened in surprise.

Swan had begun to warble at the top of her voice. Koreans call off key singers *omchee*—an endearing, humorous word. Well Swan was extremely *omchee*. Her high-pitched arias sounded like an animal in distress. Every time I thought she couldn’t possibly get worse, she did. Her repertoire was astonishing. The audience immediately brightened up, they craned their necks and tried to get a better look.

The rest of the evening was magical. All the actors took Swan's lead at playing the audience for laughs. The soccer player was sassy and conceited, the politicians were rabble raisers, but the best part was at the very end when Beth walked down the aisle.

During the brief intermission, she had hastily pulled off her mustache and another student helped her into a *humbok*, Korea's traditional dress. To someone who is not used to it, the *humbok* is quite complicated. The actual dress is put on similar to an apron. Two straps fit over the shoulders and then yards of silk spread out like a tent. The dress is then fastened in the back with a ribbon and a very short jacket is slipped on. It only hangs an inch past the armpit and it is never the same color as the dress. The jacket sleeves are long and rounded, like a circle that has been sewn in half. The jacket is closed in the front with a thick ribbon that flows all the way down to the bottom of the *humbok*. The bow is tied with only one loop. The more expensive dresses have tiny hand stitched designs. A traditional *humbok* makes every woman look twenty pounds heavier, but it is also an elegant dress.

Beth's was lovely. Her ivory dress was nicely set off with a navy jacket and a rich burgundy ribbon. She slipped on traditional shoes, small slippers that curved up at the toe, and twirled around. She practically glowed.

The king walked her down the aisle, which was a very western thing to do. The crowd loved it. Beth hooked her arm through his and looked lovingly out at the audience. She batted her eyelashes and practically flirted with every guy there. I watched from the back, my hands clasped tightly together.

The Bible students got a standing ovation that night, and after vespers the audience flocked them. Everyone wanted to take Swan to a *noribang*—a karaoke style singing room. Everyone wanted to shake Beth's hand. I stood on the outskirts and watched my students'

faces. They were animated. They chattered in rapid Korean and gestured enthusiastically as they relived the highlights of the evening.

• • •

The next term, ten people registered for my Bible class. I taught a housewife named Pink, a businessman who knew the Bible better than I did, a dreamy eyed boy who couldn't speak English and the self-proclaimed Korean Jim Carrey who once tried to stick my finger up his nose. Instead of directing another epic drama, I began telling Bible stories in my own words. I made the prodigal son handsome, but stalked by rebellion. I painted the woman at the well as lonely and searching. I described the crashing waves and howling wind on the night that Peter walked on the Sea of Galilee.

I had grown up on these stories. When I was young, my little bookshelf had been filled with Bible books for children. My father would read them to me, mimicking the clippidy-clop of Mary's donkey as it trudged up the hill to Bethlehem, or the roar of one of the lions that Daniel spent the night with. By the time I was reading the stories on my own, I knew the characters intimately.

Once I started telling stories in my Bible class, more students began registering. I got fifteen the next term and twenty the term after that. My Bible class became known as a cheap place to learn English. Students came to practice their listening skills and to have fun. Instead of being concerned about this, I embraced my reputation and began to give listening quizzes at the end of each story. I didn't record the scores, but it gave students a chance to monitor their progress. *Why should it matter why they come*, I reasoned. *What's important is that they're coming.*



Every Sunday, I played basketball with students and former students. Alex and Tommy had been in my level-three class. Tommy was tall and willowy and when he played basketball it was like poetry. His sidekick Alex was shorter, stockier, and had thinning hair that stuck straight up in the back. One morning between games, Alex ambled over. He swiped at his glistening forehead. Dark circles of sweat stained his gray t-shirt.

“You’re playing a good game there,” I said gasping. I took a long sip of Pocari Sweat, a pale Korean sports’ drink. My mouth felt sticky, salty.

“What?” he asked, leaning forward.

“Good game,” I said.

“Ah, it’s terrible,” he shook his head. “I am losing my listening skill. What do you suggest?”

Students often asked me for advice on how to learn English. I had never taken a theory course or learned a second language, but no one doubted my credentials. When it came to listening, I normally told students to start with Sesame Street, which came on the American military’s TV station. But this time, I decided to try something new.

“Why don’t you join my Bible class?” I asked. “I do a lot of stories and I bet it would help with listening.”

Alex crossed his arms. “That’s what I dislike about SDA,” he said, his eyes heavy with rebuke. “I am not interested in being Christian.”

I felt hurt, rebuffed. In the three months that we had played basketball together, I had never invited him to church, never begged him to come to Friday night vespers. “Well, you

could try watching Sesame Street. It comes on in the afternoons. It's a kids' show, but I've always thought it's a good place to start."

Alex's eyes followed Tommy and he dribbled the ball behind the three-point line. In one fluid motion, Tommy picked it up and soared through the air, his arms arcing with the release. The ball swooshed effortlessly through the ratted net.

Two months later, Alex and Tommy joined my Bible. They walked in together and took seats near the back. Like the cool crowd in Junior-High, they crossed their arms, slouched down in their seats and appeared aloof. During song service, they didn't sing, they barely looked down at the words. But while I told stories, Tommy took furtive notes and Alex leaned forward in his desk. After class, they hovered around my desk and we made plans to play basketball that Sunday.

• • •

By March, my Bible class was as popular as I ever could have wished. On the first day of my new class, all twenty-two desks filled up and still, students poured into the room handing me their pink registration slips. Frantic, I set everything on my desk and scrambled to the hall closet. I returned with a stack of plastic stools, my chin barely clearing the top. I plopped them all over the front of my room, like mushrooms springing up after a summer's rain. Businessmen, *adjemas* and tee shirt clad college students good-naturedly perched on the plastic stools. Their elbows were tucked in, their backs hunched over spiral bound songbooks.

Again, I squeezed out the door. This time I ran down the hall to Clarence's classroom, which was twice as big as mine. Clarence was more conservative, but he gave me free reign with my slang quizzes and energetic religious programs.

“I can’t fit everyone in my room,” I said breathlessly. My heart was hammering from shock, uncertainty, nervousness. *What was I going to do with so many students?*

“Well, congratulations Sari,” Clarence replied. His voice boomed throughout the institute. Everything Clarence said was VERY LOUD, like he had an internal PA system.

“You aren’t teaching class now, are you?” I asked looking around the empty room. When he shook his head, I continued. “Well, I was hoping you would let me borrow your classroom. It would only be for my Bible class and only until it gets smaller.”

Clarence sucked in his breath. “Well Sari, I would love to help you, you know that. But I do my lesson plans at this time.”

“You could use my room,” I said, gesturing passionately.

“But if I forgot something I needed . . .” His thick eyebrows raced together and his normally smooth forehead bunched up. “You can see how it would be a problem.”

“You could come in at any time, it wouldn’t be an interruption,” I said quickly. “I really need a bigger place and there’s no chalkboard in the chapel and I write a lot.”

Clarence was standing by the windows that stretched across one wall of his room. Now he turned and stared outside. High-rise buildings overshadowed the tiny alleys, the noodle shops, the outdoor vendors, the bars. Several blocks away stood Lotte—Pusan’s biggest department store. At the entrance, a giant Teddy Bear advertised the amusement park inside. Lotte World was on the tenth floor and consisted of bumper cars, a merry-go-round, and a tiny roller coaster.

“Okay,” Clarence said, turning to look at me again. “You’re doing an outstanding job with your Bible class. You can use it. Maybe I’ll come by sometime and see what you’re doing.”



When Clarence came to visit my Bible class, we were playing “Do you love your neighbors?” A student was tackling me when the door opened. I laughed and slipped into the seat, but Clarence was not amused. He hummed loudly as he stepped through the room. He pulled up a chair and began to shuffle through some papers in his desk. Disapproval radiated from his turned back. When he walked out, he smiled at us, but then, like Colombo, he paused at the door. “I’m going to need my classroom next week so I’m afraid you can’t use it anymore.” He stepped out the door and shut it behind him.

“Clarence, you must be kidding,” I said after class was over. We both stood in the secretary’s office.

“I’m sorry, but I need the room,” Clarence said. He was the same height as I was, but he was stocky and important looking. His tie was neatly knotted and his shirt was ironed to military standards. I stood in my jeans, which were against the teaching dress code, and two pigtails. “You can move to the chapel,” he said. “Though it might be hard to play your games there.”

“We were having teatime,” I told Clarence, my hands on my hips. Every class was allowed two teatimes a term. Social interactions are important in Korean culture, and I relished the offbeat atmosphere of games and camaraderie.

“I don’t know what you do in your Bible class, Sari,” Clarence said. “But students seem more interested in having fun. And I’m not just talking about teatime. I’ve heard about your class.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“You know what I’m talking about. You do things your way and I never say anything. But I need my classroom back,” he pressed his lips together.

“Clarence, this is so unfair,” I said, raising my voice in exasperation. “If we move to the chapel, I guarantee the class will drop in half.”

“Well, you figure it out,” Clarence said, walking out of the office and slamming the door behind him.

I’m right about this one, I thought. *I might be wrong about a lot. But I’m right about this.* For days, I smoldered with self-righteous anger. How could he call himself a missionary and kick a Bible class out of his room?

• • •

That week, in staff worship, I read a short poem that I had found inspirational. After I closed with prayer, Clarence kicked back his legs and stroked his beard. “Um-hm,” he murmured. When I didn’t look at him, he cleared his throat again. Then he sighed deeply and in his rich, college president voice said, “I remember when Karen and Wendy were here.” Both missionaries had returned to America the month I arrived. “We used to have real spiritual discussions then. It was such a blessing.”

“I don’t know,” Bryan said, leaning forward, his eyebrows bouncing. “We had good discussions with Karen and Wendy, but we have good discussions now.”

I smiled wanly at Bryan and gathered up my things. It was ten at night and we all had to teach at seven the next morning. “See you guys tomorrow,” I called over my shoulder.

Most of the stores that lined the sidewalk on the way to my apartment were closed. There were no other pedestrians and only a few buses and taxicabs drove by. I didn’t glance over my shoulder or quicken my pace between the dim streetlamps that illuminated the

cracked and uneven sidewalk. I felt safe in South Korea. Tonight, though, I walked slower than usual. I was in no hurry to get home.

I had been teaching at SDA institute for eight months, but not one of my students had chosen to get baptized. Since I'd arrived, there had been about ten baptisms. Some students would get baptized and then disappear. But some stayed. They became AYs—Adventist Youths. They joined the choir and went on weekend retreats together. They were zealous Christians, active witnesses.

• • •

The next week, I told my Bible class the story of Rachel and Leah. I described Rachel as dark haired and beautiful, with shimmering eyes and a quick laugh. I told how she captured Jacob's heart, a worker in their father's fields, a Shepard. Perhaps Jacob leaned on his staff and watched as Rachel and Leah collected water at the well. They were sisters. They must have walked close together, chattering about the day's events. Maybe Leah noticed Jacob watching. She was the older sister, and since tradition insisted that the eldest marry first, she might have assumed that he was looking at her. Thinking of her.

But it was Rachel who Jacob wanted. Their story is recorded in Genesis, written for generations to wonder at the love of a man who would work fourteen years for the chance to marry a younger sister. But Leah also married him, and she was doomed to watch from the fringes. Maybe she was jealous of her little sister. Maybe she was bitter at their father for making her wed a man who could never love her. And Jacob? Maybe she loved him. Maybe she hated him.

The students and I talked a lot about jealousy, about wanting something we could never have. We talked about letting go. During a small group discussion Alex, who had

been out of a job for years, began to sob. “My girlfriend broke up with me because I have no future,” he said. The ladies shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, the other guys looked away. I handed him a tissue and waited. “That’s it,” he said, bitterly wiping at his face and clenching his fist. “I hate.”

I swallowed hard, uncertain what to say. I handed him more tissue and whispered that I was sorry. When another student began talking, I breathed in relief. I had no easy answers.

• • •

In April, I took a cherry blossom picnic with my Bible students. We went to Gwanahli, a popular beach thirty minutes from our language institute. My students told me there were rows of cherry trees one block from the ocean. Twenty years ago, a romantic had planted saplings along the winding avenue of an apartment complex. Now fully grown, the cherry trees drew couples away from sand and salty wind. Arm in arm they sauntered down fragrant sidewalks.

The cherry trees of South Korea are quite exquisite. Their trunks are dark and delicate. The slender branches stretch up toward the sky. The pale blossoms are both ostentatious and modest. Each flower has soft white petals and a pink center. Together the flowers look as frilly as a baby’s bonnet. Most cherry trees in Korea do not grow alone. They are purposely planted together, lining the roads for miles. In the spring, the white branches sway and meet over two-lane roads, inspiring long country drives and carefree picnics.

We arrived at the cherry trees ruffled and hungry. I climbed out of the van, held a sticky hand up to my forehead, and gazed out at the blossoms. The sun was sharp, but the

trees were breathtaking. Even the tarmac road was magical. Dusted with petals, it looked like the aisle of a church on somebody's wedding.

We took pictures that day by the cherry trees. Not candid shots of piling out of the van or standing in clusters on the sidewalk. But a more traditional photo, a group shot. Today, I have a picture of us as we gathered together under the cherry trees. We are small figures posed awkwardly in the road. Alex straddles the yellow line in the center. Though his frame is short and thin, he is planted firmly like a basketball player; his feet spread twelve inches apart, his shoulders taut. The rest of us huddle together in the right hand lane. I squat with several girls. One knee against the tarmac, the other pointed toward the camera. On both sides of us there are cherry trees. The road is much too wide for the branches to meet, but still they try. Flower coated limbs stretch toward flower-coated limbs.

Princess Disease

“I’m going bald,” I told Sonja as we stepped into a boutique off a tiny alley near Pusan University, one of the city’s trendiest shopping spots.

“No you’re not,” Sonja said without looking up at me. Instead she began to browse through a rack of clothing. She stopped at a pair of cream pants, running her fingers across the fabric. The cloth looked soft, almost velvety. “Do you think I could wear this with my tan jacket? I can’t seem to find any pants that work with it.”

“I’m serious,” I said. “My hair’s falling out!” My hair was brown with natural strands of red and blond. It had always been thin, like all the women on my mother’s side of the family. We preferred to call our hair fine, delicate. Like china. But I was the only one with waves and cowlicks. “I wish I had your hair,” my aunt Riitta Liisa once told me. Her daughter had exquisite blond hair that wisped around her shoulders. “Yours looks thicker than Riikka’s,” she explained. Now my hair was pulled back into a ponytail. I rarely wore it down these days. But when I did, it hung around my shoulders in dull strands. It used to be shiny, slippery.

“Maybe it’s just getting a bit thinner,” Sonja said, briefly looking up from the pants. That was the general trend of the women in our family. But I was sure it was more. I was sure I was going to be bowling ball bald.

When I was a child in Africa, I used next to the bookshelf with a health care book flopped across my lap. I was impressed with the size of the book, the serious blue cover, the pictures of horrible diseases. I would trace my finger across words I couldn’t pronounce and look for symptoms that were unique to me. I knew I was suffering from multiple sclerosis,

meningitis, or black water fever. I was just waiting to get diagnosed. I was more scared about not knowing, about not being prepared than actually having the disease.

“I’m going bald,” I insisted. I slipped my hair out of the ponytail and shook my head. Strands of hair slapped against my cheek. “Go ahead. Pull on it.”

“I’m not going to pull your hair,” Sonja said, holding up the pants and measuring their length against her legs.

“Well watch this,” I slid my hand down the side of my hair and gently pulled on it, then held up several light brown strands of hair and let them drop to the floor. I turned and pulled on the other side. Again, five or six hairs dangled from my fingers. “There’s so much hair on my bedroom floor that I have to sweep it every day. Here, feel how little hair I have left.” I turned around and leaned my head back. Sonja handed me the pants and combed her fingers through my hair. She measured the thickness between her thumb and index finger.

“It’s a bit thin,” she admitted, letting my hair drop. “I don’t know, maybe you have worms. One of my friends was losing her hair and she later found out she had a parasite.”

I thought of the mason jars that were lined up in my high school biology lab. Inside, roundworms floated in yellowing formaldehyde. They wrapped around each other, slowly dancing as flecks of grime swirled around them. I imagined the worms slithering around in my stomach.

• • •

On Monday I wore a brown hat to school. It was made of wool and suede. The hat matched my brown jacket, my brown skirt, and my brown shoes. But mostly it covered my thinning hair. I walked to school with a scarf wrapped firmly around my neck. It was November and it was cold. The half-moon leaves of the ginkgo trees had turned yellow last

month and were now scattered across the tarmac. They fluttered in the breeze as buses and taxis whizzed by.

If I hurried, I could walk from my apartment to the language institute in exactly ten minutes. My heels clicked rapidly on the cement sidewalk and I swung my arms for momentum. The stores that lined my path carried motorcycle engines, tires, tools, all things mechanical. Closer to the institute, an outdoor vendor sold *hoe dduk*, a small Korean pancake filled with cinnamon, brown sugar and nuts. I stopped in front of the cart and held up one finger. I adored *hoe dduk* and was a regular customer. The *adjema* smiled as she rolled the dough into a round ball, pressed it flat and then tossed it onto sizzling butter. Her face was lined with wrinkles and she wore a red and blue scarf tied firmly around her head. Her shoulders were hunched under layers of warmth.

When the *hoe dduk* was fried to a golden brown, I handed her 500 won—a coin the size of a quarter and worth about fifty cents. She bent a strip of cardboard around the *hoe dduk* and gave it to me. When I bit into the pancake, the brown syrup trickled down my fingers and dripped onto the cement sidewalk. I licked at my hand and tried not to think about the worms that at this very minute might be swirling around my stomach, swimming through the blood in my veins.

• • •

At the institute, I washed my hands, straightened my jacket and walked into my classroom. “Hi everyone,” I said. My classroom was too small for my level two class. We were like a family of eight riding in a Yugo. Shoulders and arms brushed against other shoulders and arms. Scarves and big woolen coats draped over the back of chairs and trailed onto the floor. The students in the front row stretched out their legs toward the front of the

room. But those in the back were less fortunate. They had to keep their feet tucked under their desk.

Most of the students were in university. They were vibrant and stylish. And they didn't complain about being cramped. Instead they joked in Korean and laughed raucously. They were fun, irreverent, active. On Sunday, I played basketball with several of the guys. For a couple hours they stopped treating me like a teacher. They talked trash and drove hard to the basket. But most of the time, if I went for coffee with students, I was given the best seat. If we went bowling, they politely applauded my gutter balls. I could rarely blend in. Although we were the same age, we spoke a different language, had a different culture, played different roles.

My separateness was most apparent in the classroom. I sat down on a tall swivel stool in the center of the room. I was the only person with personal space. The students were crushed together. Most of them were bent over their notebooks, carefully transcribing the information I had put on the board the night before. They didn't notice as I self-consciously tucked strands of hair into my hat. I looked at my watch and stood up. It was seven a.m., time to begin class.

"Today's slang word is 'nerd'," I said brightly. When I was a college student, I often slept in class. My favorite professor referred to me as "the body." Now, I didn't allow myself the luxury of a good yawn. I would bite the inside of my cheek to force myself awake, to sound awake. I gestured expansively toward the white board. The word "nerd" was underlined, accompanied by a definition and appropriate examples. "Let's say it together. Nerd."

“Nerd,” twenty students echoed. Their foreheads were lined in concentration. The few who hadn’t done it yet, now opened their journals and began to write. I had promised a slang test this Friday. The exam would cover thirty words including: snob, junk, get along with, crash, and hang out.

“Nerd is similar to *wangtah*,” I told the students and finally, they laughed. “We can tease our friends and call them a nerd when they study too much. “But,” I paused, “you can never study too much in my class. Right?”

A year ago, I would have laughed if I had known I would be giving tests over expressions like “blow up” and “fast food.” But last term an embarrassing experience convinced me that slang was important. It all started when a student began to brag to me about his love life. Lazenca was tall and suave and the girls were crazy about him.

“You sure have a big head,” I finally told him. I expected him to laugh with me or at least defend himself, but instead his face froze. He looked at me for about ten seconds and then quietly agreed.

“I’m just joking, Lazenca,” I said trying to laugh, but it came out more like a snuffle. I knew I’d committed some cultural faux pas. Later I realized Lazenca had taken me literally. In Korea, it’s an insult to tell someone his head is large. Small oval faces are at the height of fashion. Since the majority of Koreans have round traditional faces, head size has become a national obsession. The first slang expression I taught was “big head.” My students loved to use it.

After explaining “nerd”, I gave a listening quiz, reviewed some common grammar mistakes and finally placed students into conversation groups. An emphasis on English conversation is one of the things that makes SDA language institute popular. Every day, the

lesson focuses on a different conversation topic, such as music, hobbies, family life, politics, college activities, and plans for the future. Instead of giving the question, the books give clues. Favorite/to be/class would be turned into the question: "What is your favorite class?" The back of the book contained all the correct questions, and it was common for students to flip between the clues and the answers.

Before conversation time, I numbered off the students. The ones became partners. The twos became partners, etcetera. The system was fast and random and allowed students to chat with a variety of people throughout the two month term.

"Okay everyone, find your partners," I said. The room filled with the shuffling of feet and the squeak of metal on tile floor. Some students trotted to the opposite side of the room, others waited serenely. Several of the women brushed their long black hair away from their faces as they bent down to gather their books.

When I saw Charlie pull his desk next to Grace, I groaned inwardly. Grace was one of those beautiful people. Her lips were a deep mulberry, her eyelids shimmered. She had china doll skin and natural poise. So it didn't surprise me that, she suffered from princess disease. The first time I heard the Korean expression, I had laughed. But it fit Grace perfectly. She radiated vanity and self-love. Now, she slowly looked up at Charlie and smiled. Her hands were resting demurely in her lap. I didn't have to see them to know that every fingernail was pale pink and glossy.

If there was anyone who fit in less than me, it was Charlie. He was a forty-something businessman with a fondness for plaid jackets. He had a generous smile that belied his hands, which he constantly wrung. Charlie and Grace had never been conversation partners before. I'm not sure if they had even talked to each other before. But what worried

me more was that neither of them excelled at English. During conversation time, I would join different groups. Now, I dragged a spare desk over to Grace and Charlie.

“Hi, can I join you?” I asked as I sat down. Charlie nodded his head and smiled. He was a tiny man and easy to like. Grace slowly looked over; everything she did was deliberate and elegant. Next to her, I always felt like an eager, overgrown puppy.

“How are you?” I asked, looking at each of them.

“Pine, thank you and you?” Charlie said. There is no F sound in the Korean alphabet. It’s common for Koreans to substitute P for F when speaking English. Copy instead of Coffee. Pail instead of fail.

“I’m doing very good. I went shopping yesterday with my sister. That was fun.” I turned to Grace. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” she said. She looked at me briefly and then stared back down at her manicured nails.

“Do you like to go shopping?” I asked. Guessing from her attire, she enjoyed shopping very much. She was wearing a pink angora sweater and black pants. Her shiny hair was swept back. When she turned her head, I could see several rhinestone hair clips. Yesterday, Sonja and I had looked at barrettes at an outdoor stand. The seller had spread a soft cloth on a table and sold hair clips. One of them was covered in embedded rhinestones. I wanted to buy it until the owner told me it cost 20,000 won, about 20 dollars.

“I like,” she said. Her eyes widened, but she didn’t smile. Instead, she picked up a pen from her desk and looked at it. She slowly turned it over and over. If I fiddled with a pen, I would look nervous. But Grace looked poetic.

“Okay, let’s see what today’s conversation is about,” I said, opening my book.

Charlie and Grace opened theirs as well. Question one said: favorite/to be/ hobby. “What is your favorite hobby?” I asked, looking at Charlie.

“My favorite hobby is pissing in the river,” Charlie said. He smiled and nodded his head.

“Fishing,” I corrected, biting down on my bottom lip to keep a straight face.

“Pishing,” Charlie repeated. His eyes focused on my mouth, while his tongue slipped around the “sh” sound.

“The ‘f’ is really important here,” I said. “Put your top teeth on your bottom lip, like this.” I leaned toward him, demonstrating an exaggerated mouth position. Charlie leaned toward me and mimicked my mouth. We must have looked like two bunnies trying to kiss. But Grace ignored us. She looked toward the window; the sunlight glistened on her upturned face.

“Fa! Fa! Fa!” I said.

“Fa! Fa! Fa!” Charlie replied, puckering his eyebrows. A thatch of black and gray hair hung over his forehead and bounced with each “fa”. His focus was so complete that even the cell phone peeking out of his suit pocket was jiggling.

“Fishing,” I said.

“Fishing,” Charlie said.

“Perfect. Now, what’s your favorite hobby?” I asked.

“Pissing,” Charlie replied. He looked so pleased that I didn’t have the heart to correct him. I glanced over at Grace. She muffled a yawn with her perfect hands.

I looked down at the next question. Mountain/beach/to go/prefer. “Do you prefer going to the mountains or going to the beach?” I asked Grace. She turned and looked at me, lightly setting her pen on the desk. It didn’t move.

“Beach,” she said so softly it was almost a whisper.

“Why?” I asked. I felt nosy, meddlesome, but also irritated. If she didn’t want to speak English then she shouldn’t be here. I glanced over at the other students. The room was filled with conversation. I could hear laughter coming from the far corner. The group next to me was bent over their books and talking in rapid, overlapping sentences. I strained to hear what they were saying, to make sure they were speaking English.

“Romantic,” Grace replied. I refocused my attention with a bit of effort. *Why are you bothering me?* her eyes seemed to say. I blinked back.

For the next several minutes, I plied Charlie and Grace with questions. Charlie answered enthusiastically. He bobbed his head and smiled. Grace’s eyes strayed around the room, finally resting on my chin before answering.

Often, I would have real conversations. The students and I would close the book and just chat about life. I would tell stories about living in Africa. They would tell me about the first time they met a foreigner or how their parents were insisting they get married. It was during these times I learned that some Koreans still go to matchmakers, that throwing food was disrespectful, that public opinion was divided about the American Army bases which dotted South Korea.

With Charlie and Grace, I didn’t venture from the questions in the text. “Do you prefer to travel alone or in a group?” I asked. “What is the best trip you ever took? What did

you do?” I reached up and fingered the ends of my hair. Maybe I should get a hair cut, I thought. Maybe layers would make my hair look thicker.

• • •

“You still think you’re going bald?” Sonja asked me on the phone that evening. I was sitting on one of the large stuffed seats. My legs dangled over one armrest; my back leaned against the other. On the wooden coffee table in front of me, a stack of student journals waited to be graded.

“I don’t know. I guess,” I said. “I wore a hat today and a student asked me why I don’t wear hats more often. He was very insistent. He said that I should wear a hat every day.”

“Oh, that’s awful,” Sonja laughed. “I remember my first day of teaching. I had a big zit on my nose. A student introduced herself and then pointed to it and asked me what it was.”

“I always say my zits are mosquito bites,” I told her.

We both knew that students were more complimentary than insulting. They always gushed over my small face. “Oh, I envy you,” the girls would say—making a fist and suggesting my face was that small. Or they would stand next to me, measuring my legs with theirs. “Your legs are so long,” they would say. “You’re so slim.”

“I’m thinking about going to the doctor and getting checked for parasites,” I told Sonja. “I might get my hair cut too.”

“You really should,” she said.

• • •

After I said goodbye, I picked up one of the student journals. On the slick cover, a superhero was wearing red and purple tights. He held one arm triumphantly in the air and he smiled rakishly up, almost out of the cover. I had graded this journal so often that I was beginning to associate Calvin with the persona. I was certain that superhero qualities lurked behind his bashful eyes. I flipped through the journal. The pages were covered with a heavy black scrawl. The graded sections were marked in red ink. I found Calvin's latest entry and read the entire section. Then I started from the beginning, analyzing each sentence.

What exactly did Calvin mean when he said, *my grandmother no cooking month because hospital next to little sister*, I wondered. Did he mean that his grandmother was in the hospital, or his little sister was in the hospital, or they both were and had adjoining beds? I carefully reconstructed the sentence in context with the rest of the piece. Then, I covered the page with my version of my truth. When Calvin got his journal back he would rewrite it, using my corrections. If I was wrong, I hoped he would tell me.

Twenty minutes later, I put Cream's journal in the 'done' stack and leaned back in my chair. My pen hung limply in my hand and I stared into the kitchen. *I'll grade five more and then I'll go buy some ice cream.* I picked up a notebook immortalizing Jack and Rose as they hung over the bow of the Titanic. It was Grace's journal. I sighed as I thought about our conversation today. She was so enigmatic. So different from me. Next to her I was all angles and strained sophistication. I opened her journal and turned to today's assignment. It was titled, "My agony." I sat up straighter and set down the pen.

Everyday, I am no happy. A woman's beautiful is her hair and my hairs are falling out. My friends they tell me to no be worry that winter is making them come out. But Sari, I am so much afraid I going to be baldness.

•••

That week, I went to a health clinic and found out I didn't have parasites. Eventually, my hair stopped falling out as mysteriously as it started. I never did figure out what caused it. Maybe it was the rain. Koreans say that can happen. When I first arrived, I didn't duck for cover during a downpour. Instead, I would let the rain trickle down my face, splash my eyes, drench my clothes. But after my hair started falling out, I carried an umbrella diligently. Or maybe it was the season. Scientists say that people lose the most hair late in the autumn. It makes sense since Grace was also losing her hair. Or maybe it was stress, or the change in diet. It might have been anything.

Eating My Way Through South Korea

Beepbimbob: In Korea, one never has to walk far to reach a *beepbimbob* restaurant. That's fortunate since it is a favorite meal for both Koreans and westerners. There are many variations of *beepbimbob*, but the most common is a bowl of plain rice topped with fried vegetables, meat and an egg. It is seasoned with red pepper paste and a dash of sesame oil. In the winter, many people prefer eating the stone bowl variation. The rice and vegetables are placed in a heavy bowl that has been heated in a fire. The rice continues to cook while it is being eaten, resulting in golden brown and slightly crispy rice.

Chachangmueng: On February 14, Korean women give men chocolate. On March 14, Korean men give women candy. And according to tradition, on April 14, everyone who was neglected gathers together to eat *chachangmueng* and comfort each other. *Chachangmueng* (or black noodles) makes a simple and delicious meal. The dark sauce is made from a Chinese bean paste. It is typically cooked with onion, potatoes and pork and then tossed with *mueng* noodles.

Den jung chigi: At first sniff, people generally wrinkle their noses at the pungent smell of this soup, which is made from *denjung*, a fermented bean paste. But once the taste is acquired, *denjung chigi* will soon become a favorite. Like all soups, the ingredients vary based on the inclinations of the cook. Traditional ingredients include: tofu, zucchini, onions, garlic, hot peppers, carrots, and mussels. *Denjung chigi* is served as a side dish. One or two bowls will be placed on the table. It is eaten self-service style with each person dipping his or her own soup spoon into the communal bowl.

Dduk: Considering the way Korean and western women crave it, this dessert could be called Korean chocolate. Made from pounded rice, *dduk* has a chewy consistency and a delicate flavor. There are as many varieties of *dduk* as there are chocolate. One of the most common resembles a truffle. In the center of the *dduk* is a sweetened bean paste. The outside is covered with a lightly sweetened powder. While all *dduk* starts off white, this round *dduk* takes its color from the powder that it is rolled in. Black sesame powder is especially delicious.

Kimbob: Kimbob is one of the most aesthetically pleasing dishes in the world. Each piece of rice is trimmed with dark green seaweed and garnished with colorful vegetables. When making kimbob, rice is placed at one end of a dried seaweed sheet. In any given combination, carrots, cucumbers, egg, tofu or fish are placed on top of the rice. It is then rolled up and the whole thing is cut into round, bite-sized pieces. Because it is easy to pack and eat, Kimbob is a popular picnic food.

Kimchi: Few can stay ambivalent about this bold side dish. Foreigners either adore or abhor it. For Koreans, though, it's a staple. There are many different types of kimchi: radish kimchi, cucumber kimchi, and mustard leaf kimchi. But the most common and traditional kimchi is made from cabbages. Cabbage kimchi is made early in the winter. In the past, forty heads of cabbage would be prepared at once, but now the batches are smaller.

The first step in making kimchi is sprinkling salt between each leaf. The cabbages are then stored overnight in large clay jars and allowed to wilt. The next morning, the cabbage is washed. A paste, made of fresh garlic, peppers and ginger, is put on each

cabbage. The cabbage is returned to the jars, and chopped radishes, green onions and anchovies are added. Now finished, the kimchi can be eaten the next day and throughout the winter.

Korean Rice: Known as *bob*, rice is the most important food in Korea. All rice, though, is not the same. It is as varied as wine. Southeast Asian rice is dryer and longer, while Korean rice has shorter grains and is slightly sticky.

Popbingsue: This unusual dessert is easy to find in the summer. It is sold at McDonalds and Burger King as well as Korean fast food chains. *Popbingsue* is served in a sundae bowl. It starts out as a layer of crushed ice topped with milk, fruit, sweet red beans, and ice cream. Some people add small pieces of *dduk*.

Sambob: While some Americans have called this dish “beans and weeds,” and others have insisted it is an acquired taste, the fans rave about how much fun it is to eat. Each diner gets a plain bowl of rice. Ten to fifteen side dishes are brought to the table along with a mountainous supply of leaves. The leaves include cooked and raw lettuce leaves, cabbage leaves, sesame leaves, Chinese cabbage leaves and kale. A spoonful of rice is placed on a chosen leaf, which is then topped with *denjung* (bean paste). The leaf is rolled up and stuffed into the mouth in one large bite.

Tubu: Also known as tofu, *tubu* is made fresh every day. In Asia, it is commonly enjoyed by both vegetarians and meat eaters. Korean *tubu* is so delicious that preparation can be as simple as heating it up. It is also served fried or in soups.

Exposed

I studied about bathhouses in a Roman history course I took in college. The textbook was heavy and the lectures were long and solemn. While the professor pontificated about the minutiae of Roman politics, I would flip through my book and gaze at the glossy pictures of aqua ducts and whitewashed courtyards. I remember the bathhouses the best. They were opulent, extravagant. They were pale men and women lounging in transparent water amidst peacocks and palm trees. The bathhouses were relics of a bygone era.

But for Koreans, public bathing was blasé. A trip to the local bathhouse was as normal as a mug of green tea or a bowl of kimchi. While I enjoyed green tea and nibbled on kimchi, I just couldn't bring myself to try public bathing. Sure, it would be a cultural experience, sure everyone would be naked, but I didn't want to be. I didn't want to expose myself. I didn't want to be stared at. Though I would be only one nude body in the midst of many, I would stand out.

I knew this to be true because ever since I had arrived, I had been noticed. In the streets, school children would point and jubilantly shout, "Hello. Hello." Adults would peer at me out of the corners of their eyes. *Adjemas* (translated aunt, but used to refer to any older, married woman) would squeeze my hand and smile. College students would practice English with me on the subway and high-school boys would ask to have their picture taken with me. I could almost pretend I was a star. But being a naked star would be a different matter.

My first experience with a public bathhouse only strengthened my determination to avoid them in the future. It was my second month in Korea, and I had traveled with Bryan and some students to Miriyang, which means ice valley.

The afternoon we visited Miriyang was cool for August. The sky was overcast and a soft breeze rustled through the ginkgoes and pines as we traipsed down a stone path. At the foot of the valley, the trees dropped away and the path grew wider, the rocks smoother and more frequent. At the very bottom of the gorge was a deep pool. Heavy water crashed down from the yellow cliffs above.

While we walked down the trail, three students nicknamed Jay, Jane and Green adopted me. They were Bryan's students and they looked about eighteen. They wore Capri pants and matching tee shirts. Their short hair was dyed into various shades of brown, red and orange. They never drifted far from each other, and they normally linked their arms together. They were level-one students who spoke minimal English, so we mostly smiled at each other. The only Korean word I understood from their conversation was *mi-nam*, handsome. They used it whenever Bryan walked by.

We had planned on swimming, but the water was too cold. Instead, we threaded our way back to the main road and checked into a small Korean motel, a *minbok*. The sign by the entrance announced a public sauna in both English and Korean letters. I felt glad for my swimsuit, glad for a chance to relax, glad for the possibility of a swimming pool. That evening, while Bryan played cards with the students, I slipped down to the front desk and paid the two thousand won entrance fee, about two U.S. dollars.

The changing room was small and eerily empty. The cool air smelled of soap. I quickly slipped into my swimsuit, stuffed my backpack into my locker and headed toward the sauna. It wasn't until I opened the wooden door that I first suspected this might be one of those public bathhouses I had heard about. The empty room was covered with blue tile. Five showers lined one wall and two pools dominated the center. At the far end, I could see the

sauna through a glass door. I knew that Koreans went to public bathhouses in the buff, but the sign had said that this was a sauna.

I paused in the doorway, wavering. Steam rose off the pools. When I shifted my weight, I could feel my muscles already taut from this afternoon's hike. I walked over to one of the pools and tested the water with my big toe. It was scalding, inviting. I went back to the changing room, searching for hints. I was Inspector Gadget, Colombo, Magnum PI, but there were no signs, only stillness and steam and the scent of soap. I thought about slipping into a tranquil pool, closing my eyes and listening to the sound of steam rising off the water. I glanced around the cramped changing room. It was very empty—the kind of emptiness that seemed dependable. I would stay. But I'd keep the swimsuit.

I rinsed off at the closest shower and then stepped both feet into the large green tiled tub. The water was scorching. It reminded me of the hot footbaths my mother made me take when I got sick as a child. I would sit on the couch with my bare feet floating over a plastic basin. With all the courage I could muster, I would dip my heels into the water, while my toes sprawled toward the edges of the basin. Finally, my mother would hover over me with her hands on her hips commanding me to stick my feet in. Under her vigilant eyes, I would grit my teeth and obey.

Now, I stood on the top step and sucked in my breath. I waited until the burning subsided before walking down the stairs to the smooth tile floor. Water lapped around my scarlet thighs. Like an elderly woman, I slid farther into the water, until I was sitting on a wide ledge, my legs stretched out in front of me. I leaned against the wall and wiggled my toes. My eyes closed in total bliss. I could almost feel the stress seeping out of my muscles all the way to my bones.

Bang. The outside door opened. Energetic voices and lots of footsteps entered the dressing room. I sat up straight. I heard someone say “mi-nam” someone else giggled. *Jay, Jane and Green.*

I looked around the steamy bathhouse. There was nowhere to go. I contemplated hiding in the sauna, but the glass door made it pointless. I hated to admit it, but my best bet was to stay in the pool. That and cross my fingers. *Oh please let them be wearing swimsuits.*

My back was toward the entrance, so I only heard the girls leave the changing room and enter the bathhouse. The showers came on one at a time. The girls gossiped and laughed while I stared at beads of condensed water that trickled down the wall in front of me. The minutes ticked by and my stomach lurched. Most people don’t take long showers in their swimsuits. Finally, one shower turned off and then another. Bare feet squished toward me. I slid further down into the water until my chin rested on the surface. The girls stopped talking abruptly. My fingers clenched and I looked up.

Jay, Jane and Green stood together. Beads of water rolled down their bare skin. Without their Capri pants and clunky shoes, they looked old fashioned and innocent, like models in a painting of an ancient bathhouse. I looked down at my swimsuit. It was black with two lemon yellow stripes. I had chosen it because it was sporty, modern. Now, I wished I could blink it away like Barbara Eden in *I Dream of Jeannie*. “Hey guys,” I tried to say casually, waving one hand through the air.

To their credit, Jay, Jane and Green didn’t laugh. Instead, they wiggled their noses and bit their bottom lips. If I could have sunk down any further, I would have. *Would it be better to flee to the dressing room and remove my bathing suit, or just stick it out? I*

wondered as the girls began to chatter enthusiastically in Korean. I chose stay, but only long enough to be polite.

The next day everyone knew about my trip to the bathhouse. Students who had been too shy to speak with me before now barraged me with questions. “Why you wear swimsuit in bathhouse?” “Do you have no bathhouse in America?” “Where do you go for sauna?”

The hardest question, though, came as we were loading up our vehicles for the return trip to Pusan. A handsome college student with tousled hair and laughing eyes strode up to me. “Why you shy your body?” he said, looking at me so intensely that I automatically crossed my arms over my tight t-shirt. His voice carried across the crowded parking lot. Conversations stopped, bags were set down, and all eyes turned to me. I longed to dive under one of the seats in the open van. With the toe of one sneaker, I began to draw circles in the dirt. I could feel the heat rising to my face as I tried to explain that in America we wear swimsuits to the sauna. It was as simple as that. A cultural misunderstanding.

But of course, it went deeper. I just couldn’t explain that what I feared was being exposed, that his question made me feel exposed. I didn’t want layers of myself peeled back and peered at by unsympathetic eyes. I didn’t want to be like a frog pinned to a piece of cardboard, laid open and labeled. I preferred to keep my defenses and boundaries. I preferred to choose how people perceived me.

I preferred not to run around naked with a large group of women.

• • •

But now, I was about to leave Korea after teaching here for a year and things were beginning to seem more important. Sandy, a Korean friend, had honed in on my weakness.

She had spent the last two weeks pestering me to visit Hoshimchung—the Disney World of bathhouses. Just once. At least once.

“Let’s enjoy together,” she said sitting across from me in the small noodle shop. Her black hair was pulled into a hasty ponytail, but her makeup was impeccable. In the year we had taught children’s classes together, I had never seen her come to the institute without lined eyebrows, plum lips and pink cheeks.

“I just don’t want to run around naked with a bunch of women,” I told her picking up my chopsticks. Though the noodle shop was full, no conversations hushed. No heads turned.

“But how can you come back America without true Korea experience?” Sandy asked. Her eyes focused on my chopsticks as I reached for some *mool* kimchi. The tender cabbage leaves floated in seasoned water and tasted almost as delicate as they looked. But *mool* or water kimchi is hard to eat. Every time I trapped a piece, I pulled up half the kimchi. It was like trying to take only one bite of spaghetti.

I set my chopsticks down and looked up. Sandy leaned forward. Her elbows rested on the dark veneer table. “If everyone wore a swimsuit I would go,” I said, picking up my chopsticks and eyeing the *mool* kimchi again. Sandy dissolved into giggles. Her eyes crinkled and she slapped the table with a tiny hand.

“You’re so funny,” she finally said. “Nobody wants to look at you. I think you have serious princess disease.” She snapped up a piece of *mool* kimchi and popped it in her mouth. “You should come,” Sandy added, her eyes serious. “At least think about. Okay?”

“Okay,” I told her. “I’ll think about it.” I swooped down on the kimchi and grabbed a respectable piece. But I didn’t plan on going.

Two days later, I met Sandy in the corridor of SDA Language Institute. The morning classes had just finished and we were both waiting for the elevator. It was lunchtime, and I was trying to decide whether I would eat Ramen noodles or rice.

“So, when do you want to go to Hoshimchung?” Sandy asked.

“I’m not too sure about the bathhouse,” I replied. Two students who were also waiting for the elevator exchanged amused glances. I bit my bottom lip and wondered darkly if they had heard about my previous bathhouse adventure.

“I think Tuesday is the best day,” Sandy said. “There is a discount on Tuesday.”

“I really don’t think I’ll go,” I said apologetically, eyeing the students for a reaction. The tall girl rummaged in her bag, her long black hair falling into her face. Her boyfriend stomped his shoes and stared at the elevator doors.

“What?” Sandy asked in genuine astonishment. “But you will always,” she waved one hand through the air. “How do you say?” She thought for a couple seconds. “Regret. You will always regret.”

We both fell silent and watched the numbers light up above the elevator door. I knew exactly what she meant. I had spent the last month determined to regret nothing. I had visited temples I hadn’t yet seen, climbed mountains I hadn’t yet hiked. In the evenings, I lingered at my favorite coffee shop with friends. On weekends, I camped on the beach or traveled to nearby towns. I even tried *popingsue*, a dessert that combines ice cream and sweetened beans. I didn’t want anything to be left undone. *What if this is my only chance and I don’t take it? What if I always feel like I missed out on something?*

“You’re right,” I finally said, stepping into the elevator.

“So you’ll go?” Sandy shouted, clapping her hands together like one of the kids we both taught.

“Yeah,” I said, smiling.

• • •

Two weeks later, I was slipping my shoes off at the entrance of Hoshimchung. The bamboo mat leading into the changing room was cold under my bare feet, and I had that feeling I always get when I’m standing in line for the biggest, scariest, fastest roller coaster ride. Trapped.

“Ooh, I hate bathhouses,” Sandy said, clutching her duffle bag in front of her.

“What?” I said. “You’re the one who wanted to come.”

“For you,” Sandy replied. All the usual pep had drained out of her voice. “You should experience before you go. I never like. People stare.” I dropped my jaw but refrained from answering.

We walked in single file down the narrow walkway and stepped into the dressing room. It was a maze of lockers, long benches and lounges with mirrors and blow driers. Naked women meandered around. Some had towels wrapped around their heads, some brushed their teeth. Others were nonchalantly taking off or putting on their clothes. As I rounded a corner, I almost bumped into one woman with breasts that sagged like deflating balloons. I glanced away and apologized. Americans are so open, so bold, but so entirely prudish when it comes to mass nudity, while Asians are known for being reserved and modest. But here these Korean women were not caring a bit about exposing their butts and breasts and pubic hair.

I set my backpack on the long wooden bench and riffled through the change of clean clothes I had brought. Sandy took off her glasses and carefully put them into their case. “My stomach is fat,” she wailed.

“I’m the foreigner,” I muttered unsympathetically. “You can blend in.”

With our backs facing each other, we started undressing. I peeled off my jeans and then slipped out of my t-shirt, standing only my underwear. I waited for Sandy to catch up. Somehow, it seemed more terrible, more daunting to stand naked alone. When I heard Sandy shove her backpack into the locker, I took a deep breath and unhooked my bra. I shimmied out of my panties and stood bare. It felt like one of those dreams where I’m standing in public and suddenly realize that I’m completely naked. Except this was reality. I looked down at my thin, waif-like body, naked and shivering. I had that same vulnerable look that newborn mice have.

• • •

Picking up my locker key and slipping the polyester key chain around my wrist, I then grabbed the shampoo. Sandy had the liquid soap. “Ready?” I asked. She nodded her head. We walked toward the shower, careful not to look directly at each other. Our bare feet padded against the walkway.

At the entrance to the showers, a woman dressed in a navy suit stacked washcloths. Sandy and I plunged toward them, almost bumping into each other in our haste. I grabbed two. They were small, scratchy, translucent, and made very skimpy towels. The only thing they could offer was the illusion of a cover up. I draped a washcloth strategically over one arm. But I tried to be stealthy—like the minute coverage was just an accident.

Right outside the dressing room, women were washing themselves under two types of showers: sitting and standing ones. Since I was here for the cultural experience, I plopped down on one of the squat plastic stools that lined a wall. I tried not to think about all the bare bottoms that had sat here before me as I concentrated on being folded into myself.

Two grandmothers sat next to me. One was scrubbing the back of the other with a rough cloth. Koreans scour the dead skin off their bodies at least twice a month. That's one reason they come to public bathhouses. All homes have showers, but few have tubs. Before skin is soft enough to slouch off, it has to be soaked for at least thirty minutes. At the bathhouses, Koreans wash thoroughly before going to the tubs and then before leaving they scrub off their dead skin. The scrubbing alone can take thirty minutes. One can do it alone or hire a professional scrubber, of the same sex, for twelve thousand won (about ten dollars). The scrubbers work in only their underwear as they efficiently rinse and wash other bodies.

Asking someone else to wash me was the furthest thing from my mind as I reached for the showerhead. It pulled out like the nozzle on a kitchen sink. After pouring soap on my washcloth, I began to dab at my calf. The washcloth was gritty and I began to scrub harder. I attacked my legs, my ankles, my toes, my arms, my stomach and my shoulders. When I was done, I felt scoured and slightly less naked.

Which was good since it would have been a shame to be too self-conscious to enjoy Hoshimchung. The spacious interior was reminiscent of ancient Roman architecture. The rotunda ceiling was made of glass, allowing sunlight to stream in. The center of the hall housed an elegant fountain. Around the fountain were a multitude of pools, bridges, rivers, and even a few caves. On the west wall, several waterfalls nestled in among lush ferns. On the east wall, wooden doors led to steam baths and saunas. It was a naked person's nirvana.

“Come, I show you my favorite,” Sandy said, leading me to a small pool full of yellowish brown water. When I stepped in, my feet disappeared. I slipped in and immediately sank down to my chin. I was grateful to be covered by the gurgling mud that swirled around me. Sandy giggled and said that we were two heads floating around in “*hoebak* soup.” I laughed also because although *hoebak* literally means pumpkin, it also means ugly woman.

I leaned back and ran my fingers through the smooth mud, letting it slip between my fingers. It was made from special yellow dirt that is supposed to have medicinal properties. Sandy told me that it’s the same type of soil that “medical underwear” is treated with. I had seen the advertisements in the subway. A glossy poster with a close up picture of snugly fitting men’s underwear was slapped up next to the exit doors. The underwear was stained a camel brown and was surrounded by yellow dirt that looked like desert sand. Underneath was the catchy slogan—Better than Viagra. It was Sandy who had translated it for me as we stood swaying in the subway.

But now when I asked, she was unsure what minerals the yellow dirt contained. I could only speculate that they were ashes from the fountain of youth, for the gurgling water was very popular with older women. We had barely settled in when seven tiny wrinkled bodies piled into the dirt Jacuzzi. I pulled my knees up, but still I couldn’t move my fingers or toes without poking something underneath the murky water. The *adjemas* smiled at me. They asked Sandy how old I was, why I came to Korea. They chuckled at her answers.

When the eighth lady entered, Sandy and I left. I went first, surging out of the water like a clumsy Venus. My body was caked with liquid mud. It stained my skin a light orange and ran off my arms and legs. I would like to have kept it, to wear it. But I followed Sandy

to a nearby shower where the soil slid down the drain, leaving me again exposed. The air was cold, and I noticed three girls lounging in a nearby pool. Their heads turned as I walked past, their eyes curious.

I walked toward a row of pulsing hot and cold showers. They faced each other in two tiled semi-circles (the ten feet between them was like a phrase within a parenthesis). I stepped into the shower and pressed a button that was as large and round as a plate. Scalding water jetted out for a minute and then abruptly stopped. I raced across to the cold shower and pressed another large button. I leaned into the pounding, uncompromising cold. For several minutes, I raced back and forth between the hot and the cold. I hadn't run with such naked abandon since I was a child running down the hall for my bath.

When Sandy grew tired of the showers, we tried out the ginseng steam room. The hot air caught at my throat and I had to bend over and breathe through my fingers. I sat at the lowest bench. The other bathers lay down on towels. Several of them pounded on their stomachs and thighs in an effort to shake up the fat and let it sweat out. The piquant smell of ginseng hung in the air.

My favorite part of Hoshimchung, though, were the baths. For several hours, Sandy and I dipped into one tub after another until we both became pruny. There was the cold sea salt tub, the herbal pool, a ginseng pool, a charcoal bath, a citron tea tub, and even an outdoor pool that was surrounded by high walls

Somewhere between the charcoal bath and the ginseng pool, I lost my two washcloths, but I didn't care. I didn't care that people were staring either. For right now, it didn't matter. But I also knew that I was in no danger of becoming an exhibitionist. I knew that when I left, I would probably take two towels. One to wrap my hair in and one to wrap

around my body. I knew that I would not stand nude in front of the mirror and audaciously apply my make-up. But for now, now I did not care.

“See you like,” Sandy said. She sat across from me. Her wet hair was plastered to her face.

“You’re right. This is the life,” I agreed, pressing my back against a stone wall. My toes wiggled in delight. Cool jasmine water lapped against the pool wall. Light streamed in through the glass ceiling.

“I wanted you to enjoy before you leave Korea,” Sandy said.

“I’m glad I came,” I replied lazily, my eyes scanning Hoshimchung. Only three *adjemas* now sat in the gurgling mud bath. All I could see were their heads and shoulders—squared shoulders as if they too knew they had found the fountain of youth. Beyond them, a mother was scrubbing her young daughter, the child’s face crumpled as the shampoo stung her eyes. At the opposite end of Hoshimchung, a young woman stood on her tiptoes under a waterfall. Her face was raised toward the sky. Her arms hung at her side, but it seemed to me that she longed to raise them. Not to hold back the thunderous water, but to grab fistfuls in an effort to hold this moment forever.

Going Home

A Korean Air stewardess leans over the aisle and pours me my third cup of green tea. Even though she smiles, her eyes look tired. The plane is packed. It's almost Christmas and Korean businessmen and students are returning home for the holidays. Only a few of the passengers are westerners. I look at them and wonder where they are going. It's too cold in Korea for tourists. I'm sure the stewardess must be wondering the same thing about me. Suddenly, it feels important to let her know that I belong, that I too have a homecoming of sorts. "*Gomopsimneeda*," I tell her as she hands me the tea. Thank you.

Only a year and a half ago I was flying out of Pusan. I was filled with that mixture of emotions that always accompanies leaving a place that you've grown to love and returning to one you always have. At the time, I was certain I was leaving Korea forever. I gripped the armrest and stared out the window at the high-rise buildings and endless traffic. From the sky, Pusan looked like any other city. All the quirky charm of teashops and *noribangs*, of uniformed children playing soccer in the street, of vertical signs and vegetable sellers was swallowed up by distance. I leaned my forehead against the windowpane and silently hummed the refrain of a Korean pop song. The only English words were: "I can't cry, I can't cry, I can't cry."

It's strange looking back now. I thought that I was losing Korea. I thought I would never again see the mist hanging over Hyoung-won Mountain during a soft rain, or the brilliant glow of Suhmyun at night, or the warmth of a friend's smile over a cup of citron tea.

But I wasn't losing Korea at all. Returning was as simple as saving money and buying a ticket. And even if I never came back, the mountain would still be there, the lights of Suhmyun would still shine. To really lose something is for it to disappear from this world,

taking a part of you with it. I didn't know this then, but would learn it in a way that nobody should. Not ever, and certainly not at twenty-five. For it was my mother I was losing all along. She wouldn't be diagnosed with cancer until almost a year later, but the malignancy was there. It had apparently been there for years.

• • •

In July, I returned to Atlanta. I remember watching the city rush up to meet the plane and feeling excited. It was late in the afternoon. The air was hazy and heat rose off the tarmac. My heart beat faster and I tapped my sneakers against the thin carpet. As soon as the engine whined to a stop, I jumped up and grabbed my backpack from the overhead compartment. I tucked my hair behind my ears and tugged on my baseball cap. My pace quickened as I exited the plane. I was home.

A crowd had gathered behind the roped off corridor. My parents stood front and center. At six feet two my father loomed over everyone else, especially my mother. When he saw me, he placed a hand on her shoulder and leaned down to whisper something. My mother responded by lifting herself up on her tiptoes and searching the crowd with a smile.

She looked so cute. She was wearing a sunflower tee shirt and a pair of walking shorts. Her hair was short and reddish brown. Ever since she'd started dying it, it had turned out reddish or orangish or strawberry blondish—regardless of the color promised on the box. I liked the red though. It gave her a sass, which matched her quick smile and warm brown eyes. I waved both hands over my head until she saw me. She waved back and then took off her glasses to swipe at her eyes.

I used to joke that my mother cried at everything—at weddings, baptisms, TV commercials—I even caught her crying after the Braves won the World Series. And, of

course, she always cried when she talked about her mother, my grandmother, whom she still missed. I was four when my grandmother died of cancer, too young to really know what was going on. When I was older, I was so used to not having a grandma that I can't remember feeling any real sorrow.

Now, Mom smiled as she put her glasses back on. "My little Sari," she said, reaching up to give me a hug.

"Welcome back," my Dad said, kissing my cheek.

My father took my backpack and then the three of us walked down the terminal, past crowded lobbies and harried security guards, past travelers and families waiting to meet loved ones. I had been flying for fifteen hours, but instead of feeling tired, I was giddy. On the drive home, I chattered about the airplane food, the in-flight movie, and how I couldn't wait to eat a salad with feta cheese. My mother turned around in the front seat and beamed at me. Her eyes crinkled behind her glasses.

When we pulled into the driveway, I bounded out of the car and rushed toward the house to see if our little dog would greet me. I could hear him yelping and scratching on the front door. But when I opened it, he raced past my outstretched arms and headed straight for my mom.

"Ramses, down," she scolded as he leapt around her legs.

"I can't believe him," I said in disgust. I stood with my hands on my hips and watched him groveling at her feet, licking her exposed toes.

"He's just a one-person dog," my mother cooed as she bent down to rub his belly.

I turned and squinted up at the house. I had left for Korea one year ago, but everything looked the same. In fact, with my purple and gray suitcases sitting next to the car,

it could be the same day. The front lawn was beginning to turn brown from the heat, just like when I left. The backyard was still green with Georgian pines. Nestled in the woods was our two-story home which always reminded me of a gingerbread house. Same blue paint. Same white shutters. Even Ramses was the same. He hadn't liked me then either.

During the next few weeks, my mom and I would take walks around the neighborhood. In the evenings, I would pick up Ramses' old leash and clip it to his collar. She would tie the laces of her walking shoes into sturdy knots. Together, we would slip out of the air-conditioned house, letting the unlocked door slap shut behind us. The air was heavy with humidity and June bugs littered the street. As we walked under the yellow glow of streetlights, my mother told me that she wanted to leave Atlanta. She hoped that my Dad's employer would move him to New Mexico. She had been looking at pictures of cacti stretching toward a wild sun. They had stayed in Atlanta for twelve years, which was the longest she had ever lived in one place. She wanted to look out the kitchen window and see something different. She liked the idea of sand and passionate sunsets. She used to paint. Maybe she would start painting again.

In August, I would leave home. I was going to attend graduate school at Iowa State University. Farms and cornfields seemed about as foreign as New Mexico, but Ames was only four hundred miles from where I was born in Bloomington, Indiana. My parents moved to Uganda when I was still in diapers. But when my mother was pregnant with me, she had grown a garden at a church member's farm. I have a picture of her standing next to a row of corn. One hand is held up to her forehead, the other cradles her belly.

Weeks before I left, I began to pack for university. Half filled suitcases, their lids yawning open, cluttered my room and the adjacent hall. I would add a dishtowel to one, a

few cd's to another. I figured that I could put a roof rack on my car and have room for everything. The week before I was supposed to leave, though, my old car broke down. Amazingly, my mother offered to lend me her red Volvo. In the end, I decided to take Greyhound.

On the night I left Georgia, all the heat and grit of an Atlanta summer hung in the air. Sweat trickled down my back as I helped my dad carry suitcases and large cardboard boxes into the dingy bus station. "My daughter's going to graduate school in Iowa," my mom told the lady at the ticket counter. She was a large woman with bright red nails and big hair. She looked at me hard and then sucked in her breath in disapproval.

"Sari just got back from Korea," my mom continued cheerfully, as if they were old friends. "She taught there for a year, but she only took two suitcases. I guess she needs more stuff now since she'll be moving into an apartment."

"Mom, she doesn't care," I leaned over and whispered when the lady turned around to search for a pen.

"How do you know?" Mom replied loudly her hands on her hips, a hint of exasperation in her eyes.

My mom was born and raised in Finland, a country of saunas, good cheese and reserved people. But she was not reserved. She would happily share her life story over a bin of avocados. I, on the other hand, look and sound hopelessly American, but I'm as reticent as any Scandinavian.

It was midnight when the bus finally pulled into the station. My father, mother and I stood under a dim streetlight in the nearly empty parking lot. The bus driver stopped next to us and got out. He crossed his arms and glared at my luggage. Passengers peered down from

their windows. I got the feeling that they had never seen someone foolish enough to ride Greyhound with this much stuff. "I'm not helping you move all that," the driver said gesturing. "You got to do that yourself." My father and I scurried to fit everything into the side compartment of the bus. My mother stood under the lamp and wrung her hands. When she turned to hug me goodbye, tears filled her eyes. "We goin'," the driver shouted from the open door. My father slipped me a phone card and told me to call home when I reached Iowa.

• • •

I never felt Southern until I moved to Iowa. Even though I had lived in Atlanta for twelve years, I was still a foreigner. My father grew up surfing in California and Hawaii. My mother spoke English with a Finnish accent. I was born in the north, which made me a Yankee. Then I spent nine years in Africa. I was global, but not Southern. My accent was more angular, less drawn out. I rarely drank sweet tea. I forgot to say, "yes ma'am" and "no sir." I preferred rye bread to biscuits and gravy.

But when I arrived in Iowa, I suddenly felt as Southern as a bowl of grits. I missed the red Georgian clay, the rolling hills, the pine trees that were generous in height but skimpy around the middle. I missed being called honey and sweetie and darling by casual acquaintances. But mostly, I missed the sun. That glorious warmth that was as big and cheerful as a beach ball. No knitted hats or wool gloves could prepare me for the finger numbing, eyelash freezing, foot-stomping cold of an Iowan winter. The first time it dropped below sixty degrees, I pulled out my sweaters. When it dropped below zero a month later, I began to wonder why anyone would choose to live here.

Gradually, though, I grew to appreciate the open horizon, the glistening snow, the scattered prairies. I went cross-country skiing and built snowmen. I lingered with new friends over coffee and gossiped. I sat at the computer with a blanket on my lap and I was happy. I know I was happy, but it's hard to remember it that way. Somehow I have begun to mix up everything Iowan with my mother's illness, even though I didn't find out about the cancer until much later.

• • •

When I went home for spring break, my mother seemed healthy. I look back now and I search for signs. Did she walk slower? Did her skin have a yellow tint? Did she mention any pain? On the surface everything appeared normal. We went shopping together at a nearby mall and she bought a pair of brown loafers. She helped me with the linguistics paper I was writing. In the evenings, we sat in the living room with the windows open and we talked. But when I really think back, I find small things that now seem ominous. She took a lot of naps that week. She joked that aging was exhausting. She wasn't that hungry either, I remember that.

Wanting to treat my parents, I made pizza for supper. After setting the table and lighting the candles, I called upstairs, "Time to eat."

"Sorry, but I gotta go," my dad said, racing down the stairs two at a time. In one hand, he held a loose tie, in the other a heavy black Bible. "Smells good. I'll eat when I get back," he called over his shoulder.

I'd forgotten that he had prayer meeting. As the pastor of two churches, he had prayer meeting on both Tuesday and Wednesday nights. I shrugged my shoulders. I knew I could count on my mom. She never went to a meeting when I was home.

“Mom,” I called up the stairs. “Supper’s ready. Come and get it.” When she didn’t answer, I climbed up the stairs and looked in her room. She was sitting on her bed reading a newspaper.

“I made some pizza. Artichoke and tomato,” I said, leaning against the doorframe.

“I’ll have some later,” she said. “I’m not hungry now. What about your dad?”

“He left already,” I replied, taking a deep breath. “Don’t tell me no one’s going to eat.”

“When you’re my age, you’re just not hungry as much,” she said.

“Well, when you cook, I eat whether I’m hungry or not,” I replied.

“I’m not going to eat any pizza tonight,” she said pressing her lips together. She turned back to her newspaper and I ended up eating supper in front of the TV.

The next morning, we took a long walk around the neighborhood. We meandered around every loop in our block. My mother stopped to chat with those who were in their yards—adjusting sprinklers or mowing their lawns. After we walked away, she would tell me about their grandchildren, or how they liked their job, or about the vacation they were planning that summer.

“I like walking with Sari,” my Mom told my father when we came back. “She knows how to take a real power walk.” She sat down on the bottom step and untied her laces. Ramses leapt around her legs, wiggling his tail.

I walked into the kitchen and filled a tall glass with water. My mother came in behind me. “You’ve got to keep drinking lots of water,” she said. “Otherwise your urine will get dark and stinky.”

“Gross,” I said, wrinkling my nose.

I can't remember my mother's reaction. Probably she didn't comment, she just got a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. She certainly didn't indicate that in the last year her own urine had turned from a normal shade of yellow to light brown and finally to black. She must have been terrified. Knowing my mom, she probably got out all the medical books we had and researched the topic. We owned a lot of medical books because my Mom had always been obsessed with cancer due to our family history. What they said now could not have been encouraging, but she never told anyone.

My mother was not known for keeping secrets. When my father told her confidential information about church members, she would call me on the phone. Eventually, the conversation would drift toward who had stormed out of the church board meeting, who had gotten arrested, or who had been having an affair. My father would get so frustrated. "You can't go around telling everyone church members' secrets," he'd say.

"I'm not telling anyone," my mother would reply tartly. "I'm telling Sari."

When I was in tenth grade, my mother and I traveled to Finland to visit her family. One day, my mom and I went shopping alone and there, in a small corner boutique, I set my heart on an olive jacket and matching skirt. Even on sale, the jacket was too much. And the skirt wasn't even discounted. But I tried them both on and held my breath.

"You look so sophisticated," my mother said. I turned around in front of the mirror. With the olive fabric swishing around my ankles, I felt sophisticated. I had never owned an outfit this expensive.

"It's too much money," I finally said, taking off the skirt and changing back into my jeans.

“Nonsense,” my mother replied. “You’re not in Finland everyday.” She handed the jacket and skirt to the clerk and pulled out her wallet. She counted out the Finnish marcs and then handed me the bright bag to carry. As soon as we got to my aunt’s home, I slipped into the bedroom to put on my new clothes. When I came out, I heard my mom shriek.

She was sitting in the middle of the living room searching through her purse. “I know I had five hundred marcs left,” she said. “I know I did.” She dumped everything onto the wooden floor—her brush, her lipstick, scraps of paper, her wallet, her US passport. There wasn’t much to look through. “I’m so stupid,” she moaned, covering her face with her hands. “I must have dropped it at the store.” Then she turned to me with fierce eyes. “Don’t you dare tell your father.”

That night my dad called. I told him about the new clothes I had gotten, but I didn’t mention the money. When I handed the phone to my mother, the first thing she said was, “Gary, you’ll never guess what I did. I lost over a hundred dollars.”

• • •

Two weeks after spring break, my mom was diagnosed with liver cancer. I was back in Iowa. The thin March sun shone through the bare trees and cars and trucks sloshed through puddles of melted snow. It was late Friday night when my mom called to tell me bad news. I listened calmly, pressing the plastic phone to my ear, murmuring at the right places. I didn’t drop a cup in slow motion, the glass shattering on the tile floor, clumps of liquid sailing through the air. I just leaned across my bed and turned down the stereo.

My mother talked about the drive to the doctor’s office. It was spring in Georgia. The morning sun glistened on daffodils, azalea bushes and pale dogwood trees. Everything was so lovely, so fresh that she was convinced that nothing could be seriously wrong.

Coming back she sat in stunned silence. “It just didn’t look beautiful anymore,” she told me. I thought about the hundreds of crows that flew over the snow swept campus of ISU. They landed on trees, filling the air with their scratchy voices. It was March in Iowa and it was gray.

I wanted to go home. Everything would be better if I could just go home. But there were only five weeks of school left. I decided to finish out the semester and then take a leave of absence. When I called Sonja in Korea, she said that she would quit teaching in June and also come home. We would take care of our mother together.

Until then, all we could do was listen on the phone. There was a lot to listen to. My mother talked about the tests: the CAT scans, the MRIs, the ultrasounds. She talked about the trips to the hospital, the thin paper gown she had to wear, how the doctor left her lying on the table for an hour, shivering and uncomfortable. She talked about how she was constantly nauseous; she had never realized how delightful it was not to be nauseous. The only thing she didn’t talk much about was medical treatments.

When my mom was first diagnosed, her doctor encouraged her to begin aggressive chemotherapy. But if my mother had been frightened of cancer, she was petrified of traditional treatments. At home, our bookshelves were lined with anti-chemotherapy books with titles like *Cancer Doesn’t Scare Me Anymore*. She had always said that if she got cancer, she would treat it with laughter and diet and herbs. Her own mother had avoided chemotherapy and lived six years longer than the doctors predicted. At the hospital, the oncologist finally admitted that her liver was so badly damaged that there was only a two percent chance that chemotherapy would be effective.

“Well, would you do it then?” my father asked him.

“Yes,” the doctor replied without blinking. He didn’t say anything else. He didn’t need to. It was obvious that a two percent chance was better than none at all. I think that’s when we all started realizing exactly how bad the odds were. But still, I thought there was time. I thought we had years.

After she was diagnosed, my mother called me almost daily. She talked about the new diet she was trying: no salt, dairy, fat or sugar. “How are you liking it?” I asked. She laughed and admitted that in a moment of weakness, she had found and eaten two Mediterranean olives left over from before the diagnosis. Most of the old food was gone. My parents now shopped at organic stores, something my mother enjoyed immensely.

“I met a man shopping with his little boy,” she told me one day. “You should have seen them. That child’s going to grow up eating organic food. No ice cream, nothing artificial.” I could easily picture her leaning over her grocery cart, discussing the benefits of brewer’s yeast. She would gesture enthusiastically, nod her head, maybe reach out and touch the child’s cheek. They would swap recipes or health food tips. But as I cradled the phone, I wondered whether she told the man that she had fourth stage liver cancer. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine even my mom sharing something as personal as dying with a stranger.

Three weeks after her diagnosis, the doctors found the original site. All along we had assumed it started in the colon because that’s what happened to my grandmother. But my mom’s colon was perfect. The cancer has begun in her breast.

It wasn’t until after my mother died, I found out that she had known about the lumps in her breast for years. She casually mentioned them to a church member and later said that they were benign. I don’t know why she didn’t go to the doctor. I imagine she didn’t want

her worst fears confirmed. Maybe she thought that as long as she didn't get labeled with cancer, she would be okay—that we would all be okay.

About the same time she was diagnosed, my father, who rarely chatted on the phone, began to call more often than my mother. He'd just discovered a way to make phone calls through the computer. At first, I was amused that the combination of new technology and affordability had proven so irresistible, but when he always answered the phone as well, I began to grow alarmed. The times I did speak to my mother, her voice was softer and she tired more easily. She still insisted that we were all going to take a family vacation to Canada that summer, that she would get better. "Just stay strong," she would say.

I was in the middle of final exams when my mom was hospitalized. I didn't know it at the time. I just kept trying to call home. My roommate had already moved out and taken all her furniture with her. There were no chairs in the apartment, so I sat on the dusty floor cradling the phone in my lap while I dialed. I would count the rings before the answering machine clicked on. Eight rings. Ten rings. I kept trying. The next day, my father called. His voice sounded tired. He told me that when they went to visit the oncologist, the doctor insisted that mom check into the hospital. Since her liver wasn't functioning, her ammonia level had risen to unacceptable levels. I wasn't sure what an acceptable level was, but it sounded like something a doctor would say.

"We're trying to get her released soon," Dad said his voice wavering. "We should be home when you get here." I leaned against the wall and listened to the silence. Dad took a deep breath. "Could you call Sonja and tell her to buy a ticket? She needs to come home immediately."

"Sure," I swallowed.

“Listen, I have to go. I’m using the hospital pay phone and your mom doesn’t like being alone.”

“Sure,” I said.

“See you Monday,” he said, forcing a smile into his voice. “We love you.”

“Yeah,” I said, tears rolling down my face. “Love you.”

• • •

Mrs. King, a gray haired church member, picked me up from the airport. She had known me since I was in eighth grade. Now we smiled and made polite conversation. Her four-year old grandson sat in the space between us. He chattered about stop signs and traffic lights. I gripped my hands together in my lap.

“I wanna go home,” her grandson said suddenly. “I wanna go home now.”

“I think Sari needs to get home first.” Mrs. King looked over at me. “She’s anxious to get home.”

“Yeah, I am,” I said apologetically.

“No, I’m hungry. I wanna go home now,” he shouted. His mouth turned into a scowl and he looked up at me with reproachful eyes. “I anxious too.”

Mrs. King sighed deeply. “This will only take a few minutes,” she said over his silky brown hair. She shrugged and looked down at her grandson; his little arms were crossed and he kicked violently at the blue velour seat. We pulled off the main road and drove through tree-lined suburbs. We stopped at a yellow brick home, where Mrs. King carried her small grandson across the yard and toward a side door.

When we pulled into my neighborhood, I strained to see our gingerbread house. It sat at the end of a gentle curve, covered with blue paint and cheerful white shutters. Tall pines swayed in the backyard. The only indication that something was wrong was the lawn. The grass was long and scraggly.

Mrs. King stopped her truck next to our mailbox. My mom's Volvo sat in the driveway. The red parking lights glowed dimly in the summer sun. I could see my father and aunt getting out of the car. I grabbed my backpack and waved goodbye. Mrs. King hesitated and then turned off the engine and got out too. My dad walked down the driveway and gave me a hug, then he turned to thank Mrs. King.

My aunt Riitta Liisa stood by the back door of the car. She was my mother's younger sister, her favorite sibling. She looked like a taller, darker reproduction of my mother. But the smile was the same. I hadn't seen her in five years since she lived in Finland.

"Welcome home, Sari," she said warmly, rolling her R's. "Your mom doesn't want that church lady to see her," she said, opening the back car door. "So she's going to stay in the car for a bit."

My mother was lying across the back seat, her knees pointed toward the ceiling. She was wearing a long printed skirt, the colorful folds were gathered around her waist. Her bare legs were swollen to twice their normal size. She had no ankles, no curving calf. Yellow skin stretched tightly across the retained fluid. Terrified, uncertain what to say, what to do, I backed away.

I could hear my father saying good-bye to Mrs. King, saying thank you but please no visitors. When my father returned to the car, he and aunt Riitta Liisa slowly helped my mother sit up. They carefully set her feet on the ground. Then my aunt gently pulled my

Mom's hand while my father pushed her up from behind. They were so competent, so skilled. I stood on the fringes and watched in horror. It was as if we were actors in some awful movie and I was the only one who didn't know the lines.

"We're almost home," my aunt cooed. My mother slowly turned her head and looked over at me. Her eyes were as yellow as mustard.

I bit my bottom lip and smiled. "Hi, mom."

"Hi," she said. Then she turned to my aunt, "I want to rest on the couch."

I ran to the front door, swung it open and propped the screen. My aunt and mom inched toward me. They clasped hands like elderly dancers. With each faltering step, my mom bit her bottom lip in concentration. Her yellow knuckles clenched over my aunt's hands.

I turned and fled. I ran into the hall bathroom. I shut the door behind me and dropped to the cool tile floor. I hugged my knees and willed myself not to cry. I didn't want her to see me this way. To cry would be to admit how bad she looked. To cry would be to admit that she was dying. My aunt had warned me on the phone that my mother wanted everyone to stay positive. It was as if only thoughts were real and if we thought about death that too would be real.

I could hear my father, aunt and mother entering the house. My aunt spoke encouragingly with baby soft sounds. The front door shut. I knew that they were going into the living room. As soon as my mother was on the couch, she would wonder where I was. I closed my eyes and wished that Sonja were here. But she wouldn't arrive for four more days. I wiped my eyes, blew my nose and splashed some cold water on my face.

When I walked into the living room, my mother looked up. In less than two months, her cheeks and eye sockets had sunken in, reminding me of pictures I had seen of starving people. In fact she was starving. Since her liver wasn't functioning, her body couldn't process food. Her skin was yellow and brittle like parchment paper. The roots of her hair were white. She had stopped dying it because of the chemicals. When I sat down on the couch beside her, she tried to smile but with all the fat gone from her cheeks, her lips stretched back into what looked more like a grimace. I bit down on my bottom lip and reached out to hug her. She responded by wrapping her arms around my back with more strength than I would have guessed she was capable of. "I'm glad you're home," she whispered into my ear as we held onto each other.

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Sonja came home and I picked her up at the airport. She walked out that gate like a spring fashion model. Her hair was newly cut and clipped in place with pastel barrettes. She wore a tight pink t-shirt and her sandals slapped against the paisley carpet of the terminal. She smiled and waved when she saw me. We were like two sorority girls as we giggled about the bald man who had sat next to her and tried to buy her a box of chocolate from the in-flight magazine.

It wasn't until the trip home, as I maneuvered my mother's car through spaghetti junctions and rush hour traffic, that I began to tell Sonja just how bad things were. We both stared straight ahead and I could feel my forehead wrinkling in concentration. I had to do this right.

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When my mother died two days later, I didn't cry at first. Instead, I clenched my fists and climbed up the stairs. I walked into the study and began to gather up carnations, daisies and baby's breaths. Every church member, every relative, every family friend had sent a flower arrangement, a wish to get well soon.

When the first flowers arrived, my mother had carefully arranged them in a deep crystal bowl. They were long stemmed roses with a mulberry stain. My father told me that she set them on our glass coffee table and took five or six pictures. She had always photographed important flowers that marked birthdays, Valentines, graduations and Mother's Days. But then the flowers kept coming and she wasn't getting any better. Finally she complained that the sticky sweet smell was giving her a headache. I moved all the arrangements into the study, a room she no longer went to. *My God, did she even know the last time she walked out of this room that she would never return?*

I gathered handfuls of flowers and carried them downstairs. My sister was hunched over on the couch. She covered her face with both hands and sobbed. I walked to the backdoor and stepped outside. I began to throw flowers into the woods.

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Early Sunday morning, my mom had started crying in pain. "God be merciful," she moaned. Then she began to chant, "Oh help, oh help, oh help." She stretched out her thin arms and clasped my father and aunt's hands. Her eyes were pressed shut and she didn't respond to any questions or comments. She was in a solitary place of pain. A place we could not go.

My mother had never believed in pain medicine. When she gave birth she did it naturally. When she had minor surgery, she elected not to have anesthesia. She never took Tylenol for headaches. Instead she liked to boast that she had a strong threshold for pain.

In fact, she had refused morphine until the day before she died. But she never got any. When we contacted hospice to get it, we found out they didn't send medicine on weekends, unless there was an emergency. On Saturday night, I called the nurse and told her that my mom had thrown up blood and was squirming in pain. The nurse said that it was not a good sign and that they would send the medicine first thing in the morning—until then we should double the doses of the medicine we had. I can see now that I should have demanded the morphine. I should have been rude. I should have called her all night if necessary. Instead, I said okay. I thought it would be okay.

On Sunday morning, the morphine didn't arrive. When I called the nurse, she said she would order it now, but that it would take a couple hours for the pharmacy to deliver it. I offered to pick it up, but she refused to tell me the address. Later, she said the pharmacist was working alone and she feared I might steal narcotics.

Desperate, I began to leaf through the phone book trying to find a doctor who would write a prescription. Our own doctor was in Florida. Finally, I ran across the street and asked our neighbors for help. They looked at my tear-streaked face and shook their heads helplessly. We would have to wait for hospice. I called repeatedly. "I'm trying to celebrate with my daughter," the nurse finally snapped. It was Mother's Day.

"It's on its way. The morphine will be here soon. Very soon," my aunt soothed my mother. "You're a brave girl." But my mother didn't respond. Her eyes were pressed shut

and she no longer held anyone's hands. The only indication that she was still conscious was her constant plea for help. Pain had swallowed up every part of her.

"Call 911," Sonja cried. She waited in horror outside my parent's bedroom. She couldn't go in the room and she couldn't leave it. Her face was red and blotchy. But my mom had said that she didn't want to go to the hospital and now hospice had finally said that the morphine was on its way.

I waited by the front door, praying that every car coming down the street was the courier. Finally, I went up to see how my mother was doing. It had been four hours since she had first started crying in pain. Finally, she was quiet. Her arms were still outstretched, but they clutched imaginary hands. Her eyes were closed, her face was slack. Her mouth opened slightly and blood began to trickle out.

"Dad," I shouted.

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My mom's sister and her two brothers cleaned her body and covered her with a clean sheet. "You can see your Mom now," Aunt Riitta Liisa told me.

"I can't," I said, pressing my lips together to keep from crying.

"You have to," she insisted. "I never saw my mama after she died. Oh boy, how I have regretted that." She wadded up a tissue and dabbed at the tears that coursed down her face. "Your sweet mom looks just like she is sleeping. Go now."

But I couldn't go in. I couldn't even go near the open door. I waited on the couch as Sonja climbed the stairs. I was still waiting when she returned. "She looked old," Sonja said. "I couldn't touch her."

After the funeral, I drifted around the house. I walked in and out of rooms, picking things up and setting them down. I would flip through channels before finally turning the TV off. When my sister insisted that I eat something, I would make a sandwich, take a few bites, and then throw it away. I felt like I was choking on emptiness. I couldn't imagine life without my mom. What was my father going to do? What were any of us going to do?

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It has been six months now since my mother died and I still can't believe that she is gone. She was as constant and as strong as the tide. After she died, I was left in a void. We all were.

I dream about my mother a lot. I never used to remember my dreams, but now I wake up shaking. In my dreams, she is always sick, always dying. Often she is crying in pain. When I wake up, there is a brief moment when I'm not sure what is real and what isn't. Sometimes, I'm scared that my mother is still sick. When I realize she's dead, I'm almost relieved. But sometimes, I think it is the last two years that have been a dream, that at any moment my mother will come into my room like she did when I was little. She will sit on the edge of my bed and smooth my forehead.

During the funeral, people also came up to me and told me to trust in God, that this was all His will. But I never believed the part about this being His will. I was certain that God would have preferred for my mother to have gotten regular mammograms, to have found the cancer early, to have been treated. I was certain he would have wanted her to live.

When my mother discovered she had cancer, she started praying for a miracle. "It's never too late for God," she told me over the phone. But I never expected a miracle. I

couldn't even pray for one. I would lie in bed staring at the ceiling. The only thing I could say to God was "Why?"

After my mother died, I stopped questioning God. Instead, I began to question my faith. At the funeral, the minister spoke warmly about a reunion in heaven. *Heaven*. Oh how simple it had always seemed—as real as the sun, as mysterious as the first snowfall. But now when I wanted to believe in it the most, I couldn't. Not fully. It seemed too magical, too wonderful to exist. I couldn't imagine really seeing my mother again. And yet, I couldn't imagine my not seeing her again.

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I remember one night shortly after my mom died when the weather was raging. I lay in bed and listened to the rain slapping against the windowpane. Periodically, the room would light up with a blue, electric glow. Outside, the wind blew against the Georgia pines and dogwoods. The next morning, I carried a chair and a bowl of cereal to our back porch. Water was still dripping from the eaves of our blue gingerbread house and my bare feet were damp from the shallow puddles that formed on the cement. Water sparkled on lush blades of grass, on leaves, on pine needles. Everything was vividly alive. Cardinals and blue jays flitted around our birdfeeder and squirrels chattered in the trees above.

I think that's when my doubts started melting away. My faith might be a frail thing, but most of the time, I'm quite certain God is real. To me, it's as simple as a child pumping her chubby arms in the air or the delicate pattern of a leaf or even my own heart that beats rhythmically in spite of the pain. There is too much beauty in this world for it to all be an accident. Religion will never be simple for me again. But ultimately, I believe in God with a fierceness that comes from deep within.



I think about this now as I sit in the airplane and sip on green tea. It is Christmas and I am flying to South Korea. The airplane's PA system crackles to life and the pilot says that we will land at Kimpo airport in one hour. I wrap my hands around the cup, my pulse quickening.

My dad arrived in Seoul yesterday. He and Sonja will be waiting for me at the airport. We are going to spend three weeks together. We'll visit teahouses and temples. We'll climb Jiri mountain and watch the New Year's sunrise. In Pusan, I'm going to take my dad to SDA language institute. He will see my classroom, my desk. Probably my Korean friends will take us bowling or to a singing room.

I wish my mother could have seen South Korea. She would have liked the way the streets are lit up at night, the streams of brilliant red that glow over shop windows. She would have clapped her hands together and said, "Oh boy, this is it. This is *it*." If we took her to a teashop, she probably would have ordered the healthiest tea and than drunk whatever my dad got. And she would have loved the bathhouses. I can picture her sinking into the mud bath until only her shoulders and face were exposed. I can almost see her smiling, her face glowing.

Pain tugs at my stomach and tears form at the corners of my eyes. I run my hand through my hair and start flipping through an in flight magazine. The buckle-the-seatbelt light dings on and the man sitting next to me obediently complies. He returns his seat to an upright position and stows away his belongings. On the TV screen, an electronic map shows our journey across the United States, across the Pacific Ocean, across the Sea of Japan—the animated airplane inches forward until it hovers over Seoul.

But we're still a long ways away. We are floating in an intensely blue sky and it seems as if the clouds are miles below. They stretch out like a rippled sand bar after the tide has gone out. They cover every inch of earth. It must be cold and gray today. Umbrella weather. People wearing overcoats and thick gloves must be hurrying through the streets, the wind biting at their exposed cheeks. Perhaps they are looking up at the colorless sky, longing for the sun. It seems strange to think of the world as bleak and wet, because from up here it is all so achingly beautiful.

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